COMBAT AIRCRAFT 131

Robert Forsyth

Me 210/410 *ZERSTÖRER* UNITS

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Me 210 V1 D-AABF, photographed at Augsburg in its newly finished, bare metal state. Emulating the Bf 110, the aircraft was built with twin rudders and also had a low-drag canopy. At the time of the photograph, it had earlier style national markings. Note the generator power-charging lead plugged into the fuselage socket (*EN Archive*)

CHAPTER ONE

'YOU NEED HAVE NO FEARS . . .'

It was in the autumn of 1937, while some of the Luftwaffe's latest aircraft designs were still undergoing operational trials in the civil war raging in Spain and a year before Luftwaffe units attacked Poland, that designers in the *Projektbüro* (*Probü* – Projects Office) of the Messerschmitt aircraft company in Augsburg commenced work on the design of a new type of fighter. It would be an ambitious undertaking. Although the *Probü* was under the overall management of Dipl-Ing Robert Lusser, the person chiefly responsible for the design of what would become the Messerschmitt Me 210 was Dipl-Ing Woldemar Voigt, a man in his late twenties. Having once worked for the Klemm aircraft company, Voigt was said to possess 'an extremely versatile personality and a peculiarly creative scientific and technical mind'.

At the time, the earlier twin-engined Messerschmitt Bf 110 – designed as a so-called *Zerstörer* ('destroyer'), a concept championed by *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring – was still at the prototype stage. Nevertheless, both Professor Willy Messerschmitt and the *Reichsluftfahrtministerium* (RLM – German Air Ministry) were already drawn to the prospect of creating its replacement. They both agreed that rather than merely enhancing the Bf 110, an entirely new aircraft should be designed and built. The *Probü* duly went to work, and during 1937-38 it produced some 70 designs. One emerged as the winner.

The chosen design was given the project number P 1060, with Messerschmitt intending to produce a twin-engined machine that would be able to fulfil the roles of *Zerstörer* and *Sturzkampfflugzeug*

(dive-bomber), together with the secondary functions of reconnaissance and ground attack. In the first-mentioned role, the aircraft was designed to accompany German bombers all the way to their targets and to assure air superiority for the entire duration of both the approach and return flights. Its penetration depth of 1000 km was sufficient for any target in England, with enough reserve to permit 30 minutes of air combat at maximum performance.

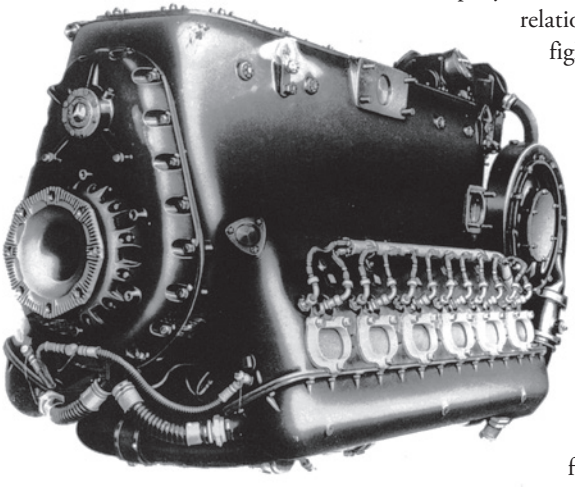
The fighter was to be powered by a pair of Daimler-Benz DB 601F liquid-cooled inverted V12 engines developing 1160 hp at 2500 rpm for take-off or 1055 hp at 2400 rpm at 3700 m. Serial production of this engine had commenced in November 1937. A bombload of 500 kg was also planned, carried on internal racks.

The RLM placed considerable trust in Professor Willy Messerschmitt's designs, and so far he had not let them down, supplying several impressive high-performance aircraft such as the Bf 108, the world-beating Bf 109 single-seat fighter and the much-vaunted Bf 110. Furthermore, Messerschmitt seemed undaunted by any difficult requirements the RLM placed on him, although in hindsight this would be recognised by many as a trait of recklessness.

The RLM, which assigned the P 1060 the official designation 'Me 210', required this multi-functioning wonder-machine to enter service with the Luftwaffe in mid-1941 in order to replace the Bf 110 and the Ju 87 Stuka dive-bomber. As part of a process of rationalisation, the RLM wanted the Me 210 to be a key aircraft in the Luftwaffe's next generation of frontline assets along with the Bf 109, the Ju 88 medium *'Schnellbomber'* and the He 177 heavy bomber. Furthermore, the ministry demanded that the Me 210 be produced in the greatest possible numbers in the shortest possible time.

On the surface, in principle, this was fine, and both Messerschmitt and his company were buoyed by the sense of faith that the RLM placed in their design. However, there was a problem within – Ing Walter Rethel had joined Messerschmitt as head of its *Konstruktionbüro* (*Kobü* – Construction Department) from Arado in March 1938, where he had suffered from strains in his relationship with technical director, Walter Blume, over that company's Ar 80 fighter. When he arrived at Messerschmitt his work relationship with Richard Bauer, head of single-engined fighter projects, had not been clearly defined and the resulting tensions may well have had a detrimental effect on harmony within the design offices. Whatever the case, as the P 1060/Me 210 began to take shape, design of the wing profile and aspects of construction suffered from a catalogue of errors.

The Daimler-Benz DB 601A-1 liquid-cooled, inverted, V12 engine was a development of the DB 600 but with direct mechanical fuel injection. It was the engine of choice for the Me 210 (*EN Archive*)



Initially, although Rethel and his team retained the technical and structural form and measurements of the Bf 110, it became necessary to accept a higher wing loading in order to carry bombs. This duly resulted in a higher landing speed. At the end of what was an unusually short fuselage, there was a twin tail assembly, similar to the

reliable form of its predecessor. To counter any loss of aerodynamic profile, the bombload was to be accommodated internally in a widened section of the forward fuselage directly beneath the cockpit, which in turn reduced the design's fuselage length by a metre. The requirement for dive-bombing also resulted in the absence of a nose as such, offering the crew good visibility when on ground attack missions.

A model of the proposed Me 210 with a single tail fin undergoes aerodynamic testing in a large five-by-six-metre wind tunnel. The female worker lends a sense of scale to the model, which has been built with a Bf 109-style tail assembly and an initially proposed nacelle shape. Just visible is the rear of a scale SC 500 bomb fitted externally on the fuselage centreline (*EN Archive*)

It is alleged that Messerschmitt had intervened personally in the design process to shorten the fuselage and make other questionable modifications to Voigt's blueprints in order to reduce the aircraft's weight. This led to protests from Robert Lusser, who objected to the modifications, and to a deterioration in relations between himself and the Professor during the period in which the layout of the embryonic Me 210 was being finalised. Consequently, Lusser resigned his position and joined Heinkel, Messerschmitt's arch rival, in February 1939.

Two months later, the RLM's *Lieferplan* (Production Plan) No 11 included a required figure of 646 Me 210s for future delivery after April 1939 – 260 from Messerschmitt, 100 from BFW, 143 from Muhlenbau und Industrie AG (MIAG) and 143 from Gotha.

By May of that year, Messerschmitt had issued an official specification that listed the aircraft as having a wingspan of 15.56 m, a length of 11.05 m, an empty weight of 5.6 tons (8.1 tons gross) and a total fuel load of 1865 kg. Armament for the Me 210 was planned as two 13 mm MG 131 machine guns installed in remotely-controlled FDSL-B 131 barbettes mounted on either side of the fuselage. Emulating the Bf 110's crew arrangement, the radio operator in the Me 210 would control the barbettes. These were to be developed at the weapons-testing establishment at Tarnewitz and manufactured by Rheinmetall-Borsig, with their electrical systems produced by AEG.

To maximise a wide arc of vision to the rear of the aircraft, the canopy would be bulged on both sides so that the gunner could see over the narrow fuselage. However, because the fuselage tapered off sharply, the guns were mounted laterally, thus requiring the fitment of a single, centrally positioned tail and rudder. For comparison tests in a wind tunnel, a single tail model was used alongside a twin-tailed version. For its time, the Me 210 was a very sleek and modern design.

The first prototype of the Me 210, V1 Wk-Nr 210001 D-AABF (later CE+BY), appeared as a low-wing, cantilever monoplane with twin tails powered by DB 601A engines. With its 'sawn off' nose and long, curving canopy, it mixed pugnaciousness with gracefulness. The aircraft made its maiden flight from Augsburg on 5 September 1939, with Dr-Ing Hermann Wurster (then the company's Chief Test Pilot) at the controls.

The V1 was very similar to the wind tunnel model of the aircraft, aside from the removal of the fuselage fuel tank. Uniquely, this prototype also incorporated annular oil coolers located immediately behind the propellers in the gap between the spinner and the nacelle, which had shrouded exhaust vents and a square supercharger air intake. Internally, the instrument panel featured a folding centre section so that a pilot could look down through the nose glazing when undertaking dive-bombing operations.

Following the prototype's first flight Wurster reported that the unarmed aircraft was barely controllable due to it suffering from longitudinal and directional instability. He told Messerschmitt that the rear fuselage needed to be lengthened in order to rectify the problems, to which Messerschmitt is reputed to have replied that such a modification would mean scrapping some three million Reichsmarks worth of jigs and tools that had already been built in readiness for series manufacture. The V1 would be used exclusively as a test-bed until 1941.

The second prototype, Me 210 V2 Wk-Nr 002 WL-ABEO (later CE+BZ), first took to the air at Augsburg with Wurster at the controls on 10 October 1939. It had a distinctively curved and bulging interim canopy that was interchanged with a more streamlined type to note speed comparisons. Initially, the V2 was fitted with a twin rudder, but this was changed in order to improve the armament's aft field-of-fire. It was intended to use this machine primarily to assess the tail assembly and dive brakes.

Two days after Wurster's flight, V2 was taken aloft by Dipl-Ing Karl-Gustav Neidhardt of Department E2 (Aircraft) at the *Erprobungsstelle* (Luftwaffe aircraft test centre) at Rechlin. Neidhardt's subsequent report did not make for encouraging reading. 'Control forces are altogether too heavy. Handling in the vertical plane is unsatisfactory. Control harmony in all planes is difficult to achieve.' However, he did concede that handling problems could be overcome with some 'simple remedies'.

Messerschmitt chief test pilot Dr-Ing Hermann Wurster stands in front of Me 210 V1 shortly after making a test flight. Wurster enjoyed renown after he flew a prototype Bf 109 at an average speed of 610.95 km/h in four passes over a three-kilometre course at Augsburg in November 1937 to set a world air speed record (*EN Archive*)

With its single rudder and a wing area of 35.5m^2, V2 undertook performance tests to assess the likely maximum speed of the future production machines on 27 February 1940. Indications were that the Me 210 would achieve around a nine per cent increase in speed over the Bf 110 at low level, due mainly to the increase in performance from its uprated DB 601E engines.

Possibly to allay any concerns that might have been propagating at the RLM, in July 1940 Messerschmitt went as far as to call in a delegation from the *Deutsche Versuchsanstalt für Luftfahrt* (DVL – the official body for aeronautical research). The visit by three aeronautical academics and

technical specialists found roll acceleration in the Me 210 to be extremely high, and this was attributed by Messerschmitt's own aerodynamics specialists to the wing profile blending. Further investigation into this revealed that the wing profile had been altered and the leading edge slats removed in a cost-saving measure by the RLM, despite the latter being needed for improvement in stall handling.

Despite the DVL assessment, Professor Messerschmitt released his own report on the state of development surrounding the Me 210 on 15 July 1940. He brushed aside any concerns over the aircraft's flight-handling characteristics and stated that control effects and forces were similar to those found on the Bf 110C. Furthermore, handling in the stall was good with and without leading edge slats. Messerschmitt also confirmed that for the production version, the aircraft would be fitted with a centrally mounted single rudder, as trialled on V2 and V5, as well as dive brakes and an automatic pull-out system for dive-bombing work.

By this point, 16 prototypes had been ordered, although only four had reached the flight-test stage. Production plans from June 1940 show Me 210 production as commencing in scale in July of that year, peaking at Augsburg at a rate of 45 aircraft per month by September 1941. It was planned that the first 100 Me 210s would be sent to training schools for instructional purposes, with the following 300 machines assigned to ground attack operations – as such these aircraft would require additional armour protection. From the 401st example, such equipment would be incorporated as standard on the assembly lines. By 5 January 1942, the Luftwaffe was planning on having two fast/light bomber *Geschwader* equipped with the aircraft.

Aside from the aforementioned aspects and weapons testing, Messerschmitt believed there was little more to do in terms of design and development. Full-scale production now appeared to be within sight, although delays in the supply of components, equipment and semi-finished materials from licensed suppliers, including the Lutherwerke at Braunschweig, Erla at Leipzig-Mockau and the Gothaer Waggonfabrik at Gotha, threatened to delay things. This optimism was just as well because the Luftwaffe was requesting 3000 Me 210s by April 1943.

However, Messerschmitt's ambitious optimism was confounded when, on 5 September, company test pilot Fritz Wendel was forced to bail out of Me 210 V2 while entering into a pull-up climb at 650 km/h. The V2's aft fuselage had begun to oscillate, leading to the tail assembly vibrating and ultimately breaking. This failure was down to the structurally weak short fuselage. Clearly, it would need to be lengthened and strengthened, thus adding weight – something that Willy Messerschmitt did not view favourably.

Indeed, throughout his early and wartime career as an aircraft designer,

The wreckage of Me 210 V2 CE+BZ following its crash on 5 September 1940, when Fritz Wendel was forced to take to his parachute while attempting to climb out of a high-speed dive. Remarkably, Wendel survived, but the crash sent early warning signals to the design team (*EN Archive*)

Messerschmitt was so attracted by the qualities of speed and range that this fascination occasionally bordered on rash obsession. To attain these attributes in his designs, Messerschmitt was known to cut weight wherever possible – even if that introduced an element of risk. As early as the spring of 1931, this practice was alleged to have resulted in the deaths of eight *Reichswehr* officers when the Messerschmitt-designed M 20 *Deutsche Luft Hansa* airliner crashed in mysterious circumstances. At the time, the managing director of *Deutsche Luft Hansa*, Erhard Milch, voiced his opinion that it had been Messerschmitt's weight-cutting measures that had restricted the necessary safety features from being incorporated in the aircraft. Messerschmitt strenuously denied this accusation, which gave birth to an everlasting feud between these two strong personalities.

The mishap with V2 resulted in the fuselage of V3 Wk-Nr 003 CF+BA being strengthened and, probably with some reluctance on the part of Messerschmitt, increased in weight. This aircraft was sent to the armament testing establishment at Tarnewitz for trials on 30 March 1940. V4 was ready four months later, fitted with dual rudders, and it was used to test flight equipment. Around the same time, a new canopy was designed that was formed of flat rear panes and box windows, which reduced drag and offered improved visibility.

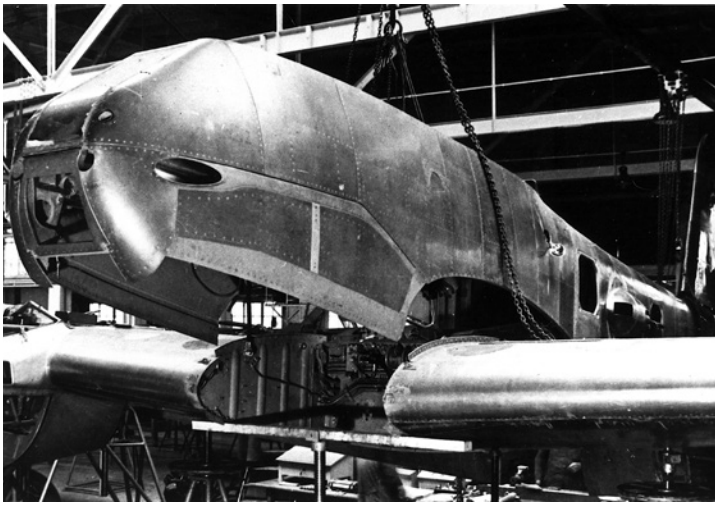
Following further Me 210 prototype crashes in 1940 at the test centres at Rechlin and Tarnewitz, the *Generalluftzeugmeister*, Generalleutnant Ernst Udet, became increasingly concerned about continued development. However, on 13 September 1940, Messerschmitt wrote him a letter in which he stated, 'I can assure you that you need have no fears concerning the airframe'.

Various modifications intended to counter the aircraft's many problems were embodied on a new batch of test aircraft, but the Messerschmitt development team soon recognised that the changes did little to alleviate the worst effects of the aircraft's vices. Flight testing at the *E-stelle* Rechlin by service test pilots resulted in their unanimous condemnation of the Me 210's appallingly bad handling characteristics. On 19 December 1940, for example, Neidhardt and his colleague Flugbaumeister Malz flew Me 210 V9 Wk-Nr 009 NF+LB/G7+4T and observed how the aircraft would stall in a steep turn while in an unclean configuration. From their experience in a mock dogfight, they found the Me 210 to be inferior when pitted against a Bf 110E/N due to its inability to turn tighter than its opponent and less able to recover from a near stall. The aircraft also felt generally weaker and less powerful.

Testing continued, nevertheless. The V5 and V9 were used for wing tests; the V6, V10 and V11 for flight-handling; the V7 and V8 for de-icing tests and for trials to improve the undercarriage gear; the V12 to assess experimental dive brakes and for dive-bombing trials; the V13 for comparison of four-bladed propellers with three-bladed propellers; the V14 for spinning tests and the V15 for trialling new radio equipment.

However, the numerous proposals put forward by the pilots as possible solutions to the aircraft's myriad problems were seen simply as attempts to force changes to the airframe and were unacceptable to the *Generalluftzeugmeister*'s office, which relied on the implicit trust it had placed in Messerschmitt's abilities to solve any issues that might arise during

the aircraft's development. As time passed, the problems associated with the Me 210 programme seemed to multiply rather than diminish, yet under extreme pressure from the *Generalluftzeugmeister*'s office, Messerschmitt had no option but to commence deliveries of the Me 210 to the Luftwaffe, despite the machine's many apparent shortcomings.



The fuselage of Me 210 Wk-Nr 0110012, later coded GI+SP, is lowered from a hoist to be mated to a wing section during assembly at Augsburg. This aircraft was subsequently used in the testing of dive brakes for dive-bombing. Manufacture of the Me 210 would have a deeply damaging effect on the Messerschmitt company and its founder, Professor Willy Messerschmitt (*EN Archive*)

Thus it was planned to hand the first production aircraft over to the RLM – one of 1000 examples due to be completed in the first 12 months – in early 1941 for assignment to a dedicated Luftwaffe test unit. But by April 1941, despite trainloads of expensive components arriving at Augsburg and Regensburg from suppliers and sub-contractors, not one Me 210 had been delivered. Unsurprisingly, the ministry began to grow restless.

On 20 February 1941, the Luftwaffe General Staff enquired as to the feasibility of the Me 210 being produced in a tropicalised version (on the basis that such a variant did not affect initial series production). In under a month, equipment for tropical use had been installed in one prototype, which led to the General Staff requesting to know how many aircraft could be so fitted – perhaps an early indication of how the Luftwaffe saw the Me 210 being deployed. Indeed, on 20 March it was requested that 200 tropicalisation sets be prepared, with a view to this figure being increased. In addition, a request was made for balloon deflectors.

On 5 June 1941, by which time still no series aircraft had been delivered, Udet established a grandly-titled 'industrial advisory board' charged with listening to the grievances of all those involved in the Me 210 programme. The hope was that competent authorities would suggest ways to overcome bottlenecks and production problems. Udet further found it necessary to write to Messerschmitt on 27 June specifically to express his growing concern about the Me 210 and difficulties encountered with other aircraft from his company.

In respect to the Me 210, he stated that the aircraft's tendency to porpoise in the lateral plane made effective use of its armament difficult. Udet also criticised the lack of an internally trimmed elevator, and highlighted the Me 210's tendency to ground loop on take-off and landing – something that it was believed could be resolved by extending the fuselage. The risk of engine fires with the DB 601 was noted, as were the lack of aerodynamic improvements, elevator buffeting when the dive brakes were extended and the inadequacy of the automatic pull-out system. Finally, the reliability of the undercarriage was called into question following accidents suffered by both V10 GI+S and V13 GI+SQ when their landing gear failed upon the completion of test flights.

On 25 July a frustrated Udet was compelled to write to Messerschmitt again, imploring him to improve things;

'The meeting with [Messerschmitt director Heinrich] Hentzen on 22/7 has once again caused me serious concerns. This month we're not getting any Me 210s for frontline testing, meaning that yet again the type's introduction is going to be delayed by another month. The latest accident could most certainly have been prevented if strengthened landing gear had been fitted.

'Furthermore, I have the impression that you are making far too many changes after the first blueprints were completed. One thing needs to be absolutely clear between us – no longer can aircraft be lost due to weak undercarriage units at normal airfields. Nor can belated changes and tinkering be allowed to unacceptably delay the introduction of a war-critical type.'

The net result of such failure was to cause considerable embarrassment to the Messerschmitt concern and was a source of increasing consternation to its design staff. Nevertheless, by the autumn, A-0 pre-production machines had been completed and rolled out of final assembly at Regensburg-Prüfening. In essence, they were identical to the later prototypes but powered by the 1350 hp DB 601F as opposed to the 1050 hp DB 601A-1, which began to appear in November 1941. The DB 601F had an air intake on the side of the nacelle and a wide oil cooler intake under it with an adjustable exhaust flap.

By late that year, however, following detailed assessment, it was realised that there was an insufficient number of initial prototypes to conclude the overall test programme, so eight Me 210A-0s were assigned for testing purposes. Another five machines were converted by Blohm & Voss into dual-control trainers.

Many A-0s would eventually be converted into A-1s with longer fuselages and an overall length, as per a 1941 specification, of 11.183 m and a wingspan of 16.338 m. Simultaneously, the company was instructed to proceed with two production variants, namely the Me 210A-1 *Zerstörer* and *Sturzkampfflugzeug* and an apparent Me 210A-2 '*Stuka*'. In basic terms, the Me 210 was now a twin-engined, low wing, all-metal, two-seat (pilot and radio operator/gunner) monoplane powered by 1050 hp DB 605s driving three-bladed, all-metal VDM propellers.

The monocoque fuselage was made of light alloy and fitted with a single tail assembly. The wings were fabricated in three sections comprising two outer panels and a centre section, with hydraulically-operated, slat-type dive brakes located above and below the outer sections just beyond the engine nacelles and behind the main wing spars. The ailerons were fabric covered. The main wheels retracted to the rear and were housed in bays within the nacelles. They were fully enclosed by doors at the rear of the nacelles when up. The tail wheel retracted into the rear of the fuselage. As one mechanic employed at Regensburg in 1941 remembered;

'My work at that time consisted of installing the undercarriage, followed by a functional test of the undercarriage installations. Continual modifications to the aircraft led to ongoing delays in its manufacture, as the aircraft had significantly more complex technology than the Bf 109. The hydraulics alone for the Me 210 undercarriage were far greater in extent than in the Bf 109.'

Aside from the previously mentioned 13 mm MG 131 guns mounted in remotely-controlled fuselage *Fernbedienbare Drehlafette* (FDL) 131 barbettes, each with 450 rounds per gun, and fired by the radio operator, the Me 210 was armed with a pair of 20 mm MG 151 cannon each with 350 rounds and two 7.9 mm MG 17 machine guns, each with 1000 rounds. These forward-firing weapons, controlled exclusively by the pilot, were installed in the nose of the aircraft beneath the cockpit. The bomb-bay could house eight 50 kg, two 250 kg or two 500 kg bombs, while the allegedly purpose-built '*Stuka*' A-2 variant could carry a 1000 kg PC 1000RS bomb.

By the end of 1941, the Luftwaffe had pronounced that the Me 210A (the first production model) was totally unsuitable for operational use. However, the *Generalluftzeugmeister*'s office remained reluctant to order a termination of the aircraft's production because there was no aircraft in prospect to replace it. Many workers were laid off.

Paradoxically, despite the shadow that was cast over the Me 210 programme, some peripheral development took place. Indeed, from October 1941 a small number – believed to have been six at the most – of 'strategic reconnaissance' variants were delivered as Me 210B-1s. The germ of this lay in a requirement from the RLM's *Technisches Amt* (Technical Office) from 1 November 1940 which had assigned construction of such a variant to Gothaer Waggonfabrik from the summer of 1941 as a replacement for the Bf 110C-5. In this variant, the two 7.9 mm machine guns were removed and replaced with a pair of Rb 75/30, Rb 50/30 or Rb 20/30 cameras installed in the bomb-bay. Two 900-litre auxiliary fuel tanks were also fitted and flares could be carried in six ETC 50s or ETC 500/XII racks.

Messerschmitt projected that it could finish 102 such machines between October 1941 and April 1942, but by September 1941 the date had been rolled back two months. Ultimately, only the aforementioned small number were delivered, with these aircraft possibly being pre-production Me 210s with short fuselages.

Partially-built Me 210 airframes crowd the assembly hall at Augsburg. Radio masts have been fitted, as have engines in various stages of completion, but the fuselage-mounted gun barbettes await installation. A similar production line was in operation at Messerschmitt's plant at Regensburg-Prüfening (*EN Archive*)

Production of the Me 210 at Regensburg caused a major impact on the manufacture of the Bf 109E, which ended in March 1941, and that of the Bf 109F from September of that same year. Indeed, from October to December, no Bf 109s left the final assembly lines.

Following Udet's suicide on 17 November 1941, matters were brought to a head when Milch assumed the post of *Generalluftzeugmeister*. In January 1942, in consultation with Udet's 'industrial advisory board', he ordered a halt to Me 210 production at Augsburg and Regensburg and

at the MIAG plant in Braunschweig in favour of the Bf 110, pending a solution of the Me 210's many unsolved problems. By this time, a further 17 pre-production aircraft had been finished, as well as 90 A-1s.

Meanwhile, testing of the Me 210 continued, as did the continual rectification and modification work. In the most obvious physical change, this resulted in the lengthening of the fuselage between the wing and the tail by 950 mm in order to eliminate yaw oscillations in flight, the danger of ground-looping and poor spin characteristics. In addition, the air brakes were moved from the centre of the wing to the outer area in order to prevent interference with airflow on the elevators; the supercharger air intakes were made round rather than square to prevent interference with the engine air intakes; leading edge slats were fitted; greater armour protection was installed; and defensive armament was uprated.

By February 1942, the imbalance between the purchase costs of new materials, half-finished Me 210 components and advance payments from the RLM amounted to 25 million Reichsmarks, while the Messerschmitt company's *monthly* overheads were running at 16 million Reichsmarks. After 17 machines had been lost in one week, and faced with bankruptcy for a second time, Willy Messerschmitt finally admitted to Göring and Milch during a conference at the RLM in Berlin on 12 March that the aircraft was not ready for service use. To make matters worse, no fewer than 370 half-completed airframes lay around the factories in full sight of the disillusioned workforce.

Milch – not a man usually given to displaying traits of exoneration – decided to give Messerschmitt one last chance. The Me 210 should revert to Voigt's original design before Messerschmitt had started to tamper with it on the grounds of weight-avoidance, but this was to be on the basis that ten examples were to be manufactured immediately and the first six had to be delivered by 1 April. The aircraft were also to have longer fuselages. With a touch of sarcasm, Göring later proposed an epitaph for himself – 'He would have lived longer but for the Me 210'.

On 25 March 1942, Messerschmitt made a personal appeal over the Augsburg factory loudspeaker system exhorting the workforce to ignore rumours circulating about the uncertain future of the Me 210. Yet by 1 April there were still no experimental machines with extended fuselages as promised by the Professor.

At a *Generalluftzeugmeister*'s conference on 14 April, Milch mentioned the possibility of removing the Professor from the Messerschmitt management executive before his 'genius's skull' could do the Luftwaffe any further damage. He decided to dispatch Generalstabs-Ingenieur Dipl-Ing Roluf Lucht, the *General-Chefinginieur der Luftwaffe*, to inspect the Messerschmitt factories. Lucht subsequently submitted a graphic report at the *Generalluftzeugmeister*'s conference on 21 April;

'I found Messerschmitt a broken man. He was physically at a very low ebb and crazy with emotion. He was crying like a baby.'

Lucht recommended that Messerschmitt be removed from the management executive, to which Milch readily agreed. Shortly thereafter Milch secured Göring's approval that the Me 210 should be deleted from the existing GL production programme, and on 25 April 1942 all work on the ill-fated aircraft finally ceased. Milch announced at one of his

regular conferences two days later, 'Thus, the aircraft can be considered a dead duck'. That night RAF bombs rained down on the city of Rostock and the nearby Heinkel aircraft plant, causing production there to cease for a period.

In total 94 Me 210s had been completed at Augsburg and 258 examples at Regensburg, with a further 540 partially completed airframes at both plants.

Milch instructed that Messerschmitt should continue to honour its contracts with its suppliers and take delivery of all and any components – these were offloaded from trains and stored in an aircraft hangar near Augsburg, creating a stockpile worth some 68 million Reichsmarks – enough for more than 800 aircraft. Any fully assembled aircraft were parked on Obertraubling airfield.

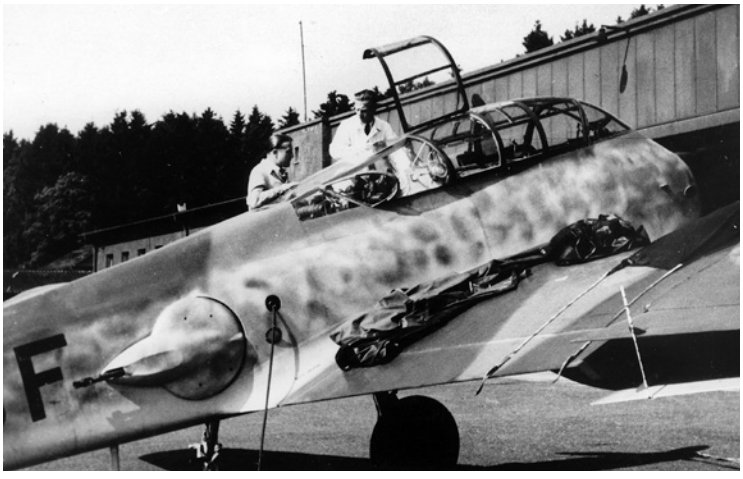
One young Messerschmitt employee remembered how he was ordered to Obertraubling to 'chop up 100 Me 210s'. With heavy hearts, mechanics began the systematic destruction of the aircraft upon which they had worked. Some items such as clocks with illuminated numerals were removed and secreted away back to workers' homes as souvenirs. Once engines and tyres had been removed from an Me 210, the work parties simply set about it with an axe. In the production halls, a state of confusion and chaotic disorder reigned for a period and the decision was taken to dismantle two final assembly lines at Regensburg. But then came counter-orders, 'Just as we had hacked 12 aircraft to pieces', recalled one worker, 'came the order "Stop! Stop!" The designers had found another solution – the fuselage was lengthened by one metre, the nose-heaviness had disappeared and the aircraft flew faultlessly. In the shortest possible time, we modified the remaining aircraft'.

Professor Messerschmitt's adjustments to Voigt's designs had, effectively, cost his business and the Luftwaffe 1000 aircraft at a time when they were badly needed.

Such was the eventual outcome of the Me 210 fiasco, which almost forced the Messerschmitt concern into bankruptcy to the tune of some 38 million Reichsmarks and brought personal humiliation to Willy Messerschmitt, who was compelled to resign as chairman of the management committee and as managing director of Messerschmitt A.G., the holding company. In future, his activities would be restricted to that of Technical Director and Head of Development. He would play no part in the day-to-day affairs of the company, with Theo Croneiss becoming Chairman and Fritz Seiler filling the post of Managing Director.

In the meantime, many of the A-0 and A-1 models had been returned to the factories for reworking and testing. Some of this represented positive movement, specifically in respect to Me 210 V18 Wk-Nr 105 PN+PD, which, fitted with new DB 605B engines providing greater displacement, higher revolutions, higher compression ratio and a more powerful supercharger than the DB 601, became the prototype Me 210C. It was hoped to build some 300 such examples by December 1942.

Additionally, the earlier mentioned improvement and modification recommendations had been incorporated into the V16 (GI+ST) and V17 prototypes, and these proved encouraging, inspiring the *Kobü* to commence work on a new *Kampfzerstörer* variant fitted with more powerful



Instrument specialists check equipment in the rear cockpit of an early production Me 210A-1 (*EN Archive*)

engines and built with much better handling characteristics. This was to be the Me 210E, but as an immediate step a number of A-1s were approved for upgrade to V17 standard.

Then, in June 1942, Messerschmitt was authorised to recommence production of the A-1, but with the aforementioned improvements built in. Somewhat strangely, despite the new engineering, the longer variant continued to be known as the A-1. It is believed that between 160-180 'long' Me 210A-1s were constructed from a total of 354 shorter-fuselage A-1s completed at Augsburg and Regensburg.

Although the aforementioned C-model was intended to replace the A-1 from May 1943, the urgent requirement for DB 605As to fit to single-engined fighters significantly impacted production and a number of planned C variants were not built, such as the C-1 and C-2 heavy fighters and dive-bombers. As early as August 1941, Messerschmitt had a target to construct 282 C-1s – capable of carrying an 1800 kg bomb and an external rack beneath the bomb-bay – between March and December 1942, but this figure had increased by September 1941 to 945 from March 1942 to October 1943. These aircraft would probably have had lengthened fuselages.

The C variants and also the D-1 reconnaissance machine were all intended modifications of the A-1 and all to be powered by the 1475 hp DB 605B with MW 1 methanol injection. There was a plan to manufacture 190 D-1s between February and December 1942 (later with a long fuselage) but again nothing came of it, although it is believed that V17 Wk-Nr 101 was so converted in late 1942 and tested in 1943.

Plans were also in place for an Me 210E-1 *Zerstörer*, F-1 and F-2 reconnaissance aircraft powered by the DB 603 and the Me 210S-1 intended for ground attack operations and fitted with additional armour around the cockpit, bomb-bay, frontal area of the engines and oil coolers. Ordnance was to have been carried in the form of one 500 kg, two 25 kg or eight 50 kg bombs in the bomb-bay, as well as four ETC 50/VIIIs or canisters of SD-2 bombs under the inner wing sections, but the weight of such ordnance and armour protection resulted in a lower fuel load. The S-2 was intended for fitment with the DB 605.

Meanwhile, on 4 August 1942, Messerschmitt finally advised the RLM that ten Me 210s with extended fuselages had been delivered to the Luftwaffe from a total of twelve lengthened machines that had been completed by that date at Regensburg. Another five examples were ferried to Lechfeld for assessment by the *Bauaufsicht der Luftwaffe* (Construction Inspectorate).

Thus, after a tortuous, maligned gestation, the Me 210, while perhaps not necessarily ready for war, was about to be assessed for it.

A view of an extended dive brake on Me 210 Wk-Nr 0166 VN+AD at Augsburg in early 1942 – one of four fitted to the aircraft. They were eventually deleted during the Me 210's protracted development. It is believed that Wk-Nr 0166 was later converted into one of only two prototypes for the proposed S-model, and was also used for bombing trials (*EN Archive*)

CHAPTER TWO

UNDER TRIAL

As a preliminary measure to trial and assess the Me 210 operationally in Luftwaffe service, the dedicated test unit *Erprobungsgruppe* 210 was established at Köln-Ostheim airfield on 1 July 1940 under the command of Hauptmann Walter Rubensdörffer, a veteran of the *Legion Condor* who had later been attached to the 1.*Abt.*/*Genst.d.Lw* within the RLM. However, because of the extended delays in the aircraft's completion, the idea was abandoned and *Erprobungsgruppe* 210 was instead used to develop the *Zerstörer* concept with cannon-armed and bomb-carrying Bf 110C and D fighter-bombers in low-level and dive-bombing sorties.

With this type, and the Bf 109E, the unit operated over England and against shipping in the English Channel, earning itself an impressive record but also sustaining fearsome losses, including that of Rubensdörffer. Personnel from the *Gruppe* received three Knight's Crosses during the Battle of Britain, all of them posthumously, which served as testimony to the intensity of its Bf 110 operations. Nevertheless, the '210' element of its unit name remained, signifying the background belief in the eventual appearance of its namesake aircraft.

Meanwhile, in early 1941, Major Walter Storp, a Knight's Cross-holder, had been championing the Luftwaffe's adoption of the Me 210. Storp's word carried weight in high places, for he was a darling of the Luftwaffe's propaganda machine. Having been one of the first pilots to fly the Ju 88 operationally, he had gone on to enjoy an illustrious career with

An FDL-B 131 remotely-controlled gun barbette, housing a 13 mm MG 131 machine gun, was fitted into a circular opening on each side of the Me 210's fuselage, as seen here on an early, short-fuselage model. The apparatus did provide some effective measure of defence against nightfighters for aircraft operating over England. The stencilling on the barbette gun housing reads, 'After disconnecting the compressed air pressure, carefully remove cover'. The panel forward of the barbette opened the dinghy stowage compartment, and the inscription on it reads, 'Before starting check that the horizontal hydraulic tailplane switches are in the correct position' (*EN Archive*)

the aircraft whilst serving with 8./KG 4 and I./KG 30, with whom he had launched an audacious attack on the carrier HMS *Ark Royal* and battlecruiser HMS *Hood* in the North Sea. More recently, Storp had served as *Kommandeur* of II./KG 76.

Because of his experience and success while flying in the *Erprobungsstaffel Ju 88*, and apparently impressed by Messerschmitt's new-generation *Zerstörer*, Storp was able to convince the RLM that the establishment of a *new* Me 210 test unit was a good idea, and he would continue to be a figure of some influence in the Me 210's development. Thus, the *Erprobungsstaffel* 210 was formed at Rechlin under the command of Oberleutnant Weyert, with its personnel drawn from *Zerstörer* schools and training units as well as the *Ergänzungsgruppen*.

In an ominous sign, however, Weyert crashed and was killed in early April 1941. He was succeeded by Hauptmann Heinz Nacke on 12 April. Another *Legion Condor* veteran, Nacke had received the Knight's Cross on 2 November 1940 having scored 12 victories while flying the Bf 110 as *Staffelkapitän* of 6./ZG 76, which he had led with distinction during the Polish and Western campaigns. Nacke's tenure of command at the *Erprobungsstaffel* would last only four months, at which point he was reassigned to take command of II./ZG 76.

Nacke would, in turn, be replaced on 14 August 1941 by Oberleutnant Heinz Forgatsch, assigned from his post as *Staffelkapitän* of the recently formed 3./SKG 210 which had been established in late April, its parent I. *Gruppe* being manned largely by personnel from the *Erprobungsgruppe* 210. Forgatsch was a veteran of the 1940 Channel campaign against Britain, during which he had flown with 2. *Staffel*. He duly became *Staffelkapitän* of 3./SKG 210 when it was reformed with Bf 110s in late 1940.

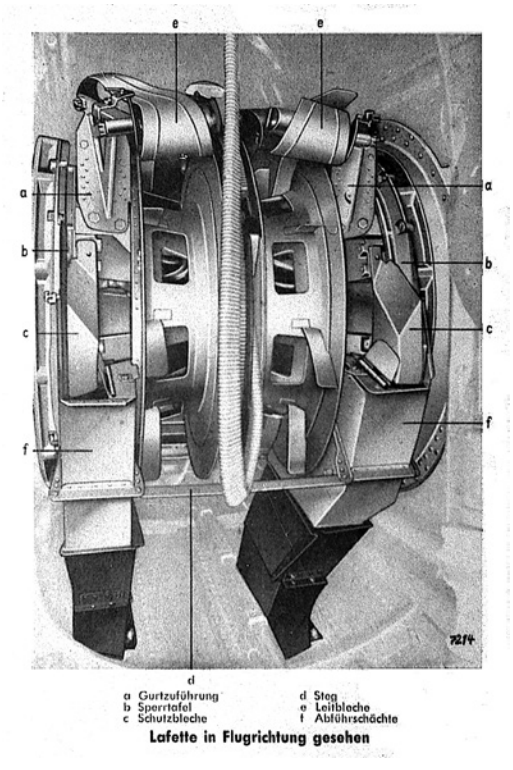
Forgatsch and his radio operator, Feldwebel Kurt Hoffmann, were ordered to report to the *Erprobungsstelle* Rechlin to undertake type-testing and some initial familiarisation on the Me 210. However, on 23 September 1941, while flying Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 117, believed to have been coded SJ+GG, Forgatsch and Hoffmann crashed at Gut Ankershagen, northwest of the test centre, due to engine problems. Both airmen were killed.

Forgatsch's replacement was to be Oberleutnant Wolfgang Schenck, who took over the day after the former was lost. Schenck was a very experienced unit commander and tactician, having returned from farming in East Africa to join the Luftwaffe in 1938 as a fighter pilot with II./JG 132. This *Gruppe* went through a series of redesignations, and by the time of the Polish campaign in September 1939, it had become I./ZG 1, with whom Schenck flew the Bf 110. Subsequently, he served in Poland and France, but was wounded in air combat and was hospitalised for three months.

Upon his return to duties in September 1940, Schenck was assigned to *Erprobungsgruppe* 210, taking over command of 1. *Staffel* within weeks. He conducted regular and highly effective fighter-bomber missions in the Bf 110 over southern England, targeting industrial areas and shipping (he accounted for 38,000 tons sunk). In April 1941 his *Staffel* was redesignated 1./SKG 10, and subsequently saw action on the Eastern Front, where it operated with great success. On one occasion, during an attack by 1./SKG 10 on a Soviet airfield in southern Russia, Schenck shot down four enemy aircraft and destroyed several more on the ground – a deed for which he would be awarded the Knight's Cross on 14 August 1941.

It is a measure of how the RLM and the Luftwaffe viewed the Me 210 at this time, despite any flaws it may have possessed, that such a tactically experienced and valuable pilot as Schenck was reassigned to oversee trials with the aircraft at Rechlin.

In November, *Erprobungsstaffel* 210 received the first 16 Me 210A-1s, and initial flights demonstrated that experienced pilots such as Schenck found little difficulty with the aircraft, although it was recognised that care was needed on take-off as there was a tendency to veer offline. Flight-handling was found to at least equate with that of the Bf 110, although inexperienced pilots struggled much more with the new mount.



This manual artwork reveals the inner workings of the twin FDL-B 131 barbette installation within the fuselage of an Me 210, looking forward. The keyed entries are as follows – a) belt feed mechanism; b) locking plate; c) fender; d) frame; e) baffles; f) ejection chutes (*EN Archive*)

However, the shortcomings of the Me 210 were illustrated when Schenck engaged in mock air combat against another such machine piloted by Oberleutnant Walter Maurer, who had joined the test programme in October 1941 following service with 3./ZG 2, ZG 76 and, finally, the *Stab* of II./SKG 10. While at Rechlin, as he was flying at a speed of around 450 km/h, his Messerschmitt went into a flat spin and crashed. Fortunately, Maurer survived, but the episode was another glaring display of how volatile the Me 210 could be at certain speed ranges.

Schenck's time with *Erprobungsstaffel* 210 was to be relatively short and he was posted away in January 1942 to his old unit in Russia, which had, in the meantime, been redesignated I./ZG 1.

Among the early cadre of pilots selected to fly the Me 210 was Johannes Kaufmann, an instructor at the *Zerstörerschule* in Schleissheim, who was enthralled by the new aircraft;

'The Me 210 really impressed us. Unfortunately, we had only minimal instructions as suitable instructor personnel were not available. One had to proceed

With the aid of a mobile crane, Messerschmitt technicians set about removing one of the DB 603 engines from Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 0110281 SO+MU at Augsburg following a crash-landing on the airfield on 26 March 1943. The aircraft suffered 65 per cent damage in the accident. The Me 210 test programme was marred by many such incidents, and crashes went on to plague the type in operational service (*EN Archive*)

cautiously in order to get used to its innovative features when compared to the Bf 110, and to learn how to handle them. It was a faster aircraft, and the bombs could be housed internally in the fuselage. Performance in the climb was much improved, and in the dive it was comfortable with the demands placed on it. The armament was more effective, and the radio and navigational equipment had been improved. In summary, the Me 210 was a more racy aircraft. We had high hopes for it and consequently we eagerly looked forward to our first flight.

'This took place on 14 November 1941. Take-off was conducted with extreme caution due to the known danger that the aircraft was liable to veer off the runway, but it all happened without any problems. Take-off was quite short and I flew a normal circuit around the airfield which lasted seven minutes. The warning of danger on take-off was justified, as there was need for some corrections to be made with the rudder and the engines in order to stay on a straight course.

'My second flight went off better, and I was in the air for 26 minutes so as to really test the new aircraft. The flying characteristics were good – better than the Bf 110. It especially possessed higher manoeuvrability and rapid acceleration. Approach and landing caused no problems. Here, it naturally differed from the Bf 110, but this in no way could be deemed a disadvantage. We practised dropping bombs, gunnery in the air, diving and formation flying, and quickly became familiar with its peculiarities, which led to high expectations.'

On 17 November 1941, following a visit to Messerschmitt by Dipl-Ing Karl Frydag, representing the RLM, Major Edgar Petersen, the *Kommandeur der Erprobungsstellen*, and erstwhile commander of *Erprobungsstaffel* 210, Major Storp, it was agreed the Me 210 did represent a 'viable aircraft'.

On 16 December, the day that three Me 210s of 1./SKG 210 were damaged at Landsberg due to the very factor that Udet had written so clearly about to Messerschmitt earlier in the year – faulty landing gear – the Luftwaffe General Staff confirmed that it wanted the Me 210 as a close-support aircraft only. Therefore, the need for dive-bombing was dropped from the development programme. The first 100 machines off the assembly line would remain unchanged, but the following 300 aircraft would be built to close-support/ground attack configuration – as distinct from being a light-bomber – with shaped extra armour to be supplied by Henschel and straight plates by a steel firm.

In January 1942, the Luftwaffe took delivery of 64 new Messerschmitt-built Me 210A-1s with longer fuselages and a further nine produced by MIAG at Braunschweig. In order to familiarise pilots on

OPPOSITE

Messerschmitt technicians work on Me 210 Wk-Nr 0166 VN+AD ahead of its acceptance flight at Augsburg in January 1942. A test pilot stands in his overalls on the left wing, while another engineer attends to the extended dive brake on the right wing. The aircraft, which has a bulged canopy, would be converted into an Me 410 in 1943 (*EN Archive*)

this new variant, another test unit was established known as *Versuchsstaffel* 210, although this did not reach operational status until August 1942 when it was based at Soesterberg, in the Netherlands.

On 27 January the office of the *Generalluftzeugmeister* projected that 240 Me 210s would be delivered with armour protection from Landsberg by 15 May. By 24 February, Henschel had delivered 80 sets of armour intended for the Me 210S, and these were in addition to the sets for the aforementioned 240 aircraft.

Having had its wings removed following the crash-landing at Augsburg, the fuselage of Me 210A-1 SO+MU has been loaded onto a trailer and is towed away for repair. This photograph was one in a sequence of images taken at the time in order to allow artwork to be created for technical handbooks as a guide for groundcrew on how to salvage and transport a crashed and damaged Me 210 (*EN Archive*)

Despite the progress that was clearly being made with the aircraft, on 6 March the mood at a technical conference held at Göring's residence at Carinhall, in East Prussia, and chaired by the *Reichsmarschall* was negative. The newly promoted Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, Generaloberst Hans Jeschonnek, complained that the Me 210 would still enter a flat spin quite easily for inexplicable reasons, and that on two occasions, worryingly, engines had fallen away in flight. Test unit crews had also died in nose-over accidents. 'The Me 210 can't be imposed on the crews', Jeschonnek stated. 'It is extremely questionable whether the Me 210 can enter operations this spring. For its intended role, the aircraft is entirely unsuited in its current configuration'.

Generalfeldmarschall Milch, also in attendance, reminded the meeting that Messerschmitt wanted to extend the aircraft's fuselage to quickly bring it to operational readiness in numbers. He also acknowledged that in the eventuality that the Me 210 was 'abandoned', plans were being examined to re-equip the six *Gruppen* intended for conversion to the Me 210 with the tried and tested Bf 109 and Bf 110. Furthermore, the proposed Ar 240C-1, Arado's similarly formed twin-engined, multi-purpose aircraft with remotely-controlled defensive armament, could be considered as a high-speed bomber replacement for the Me 210 from 1943.

Three days after the Carinhall conference, Professor Messerschmitt was summoned to a two-hour meeting aboard Göring's personal train specifically to discuss the question of the future of the Me 210. Also in attendance were Storp and Hauptmann Ulrich Diesing, the former *Kommandeur* of I./SKG 210 who had recently been appointed *Kommodore* of ZG 1. Göring opened proceedings by spelling out the Me 210's prevailing problems, and by expressing his dismay over it. He also stated that he had been assured that the aircraft was acceptable, which made the realisation of just how bad things were even harder to take. Sardonically, Göring remarked that if he envied the late Udet over anything, it was the fact that he no longer had to deal with the Messerschmitt failure.

Diesing was then asked to give an overview of the limited experience gained so far from the operational units. His report did not make for encouraging listening – failure could be expected after every 50 flight

hours, and thus there had been very limited test-firing and bombing flights, while the poor level of operational readiness restricted flight training. In terms of handling, there was a tendency to ground-loop, take-off and landing were difficult for many pilots, there was a danger of spinning and there were problems with both the electrics and the hydraulics.

In terms of tactical capability, the aircraft was able only to carry 50 kg of bombs at a dive angle of just 30 degrees, and, in any case, the weapons system only functioned in one aircraft. The anticipated Me 210S ground attack variant was still awaited, and in answer to the question of whether deployment at *Geschwader*-level by the spring was possible, Diesing responded that he felt it was not. Storp then justified his earlier favourable impressions of the Me 210 by stating that he genuinely believed as recently as October 1941 – as had Milch – that the aircraft would be available by the spring of 1942. However, because of the failure in aircraft delivery, Generaloberst Jeschonnek had instructed him to seek the *Reichsmarschall*'s decision on the spring deployment of the new Me 210S.

With increasing irritation, Göring proclaimed that the RLM had been wrong to prematurely curtail or stop production of the Bf 110, Ju 87 and Ju 88 in favour of the Me 210, particularly since without conversion into an S-model the Me 210 fundamentally failed in its intended role. Göring ordered that production was to be halted immediately, but that in the interim Messerschmitt would carry out immediate changes to the jigs for a modified Me 210.

But such instructions ultimately proved to have been issued in vain. At a *Generalluftzeugmeister* conference on 14 April 1942, Oberst Dipl-Ing Wolfgang Vorwald, Chief of the *Technisches Amt*, advised that the six hoped-for Me 210 test aircraft were not expected until 20 April as a result of the high increase in the number of changes required, from four to forty. Therefore, a return to series production was not possible before October. Five days later, after convening with Göring, Milch effectively killed off the Me 210 when he issued the following memo to his staff and other senior officers;

'The Me 210 will no longer be a significant player in 1942, and whether or not it will be produced at all depends on evaluation. After queries and assessment on the Me 210's potential, which Generaloberst Jeschonnek and Major Storp, among others, have completely rejected, the *Reichsmarschall* has directed the Me 210 will be dropped from the programme.'

Milch also issued instructions stating that Gothaer Waggonfabrik and Lutherwerke would play no further part in license-building the aircraft, and that the jigs they held could be used for other purposes. Notwithstanding these decisions being taken at high level, small numbers of Me 210s had filtered through to operational units nevertheless. Over the coming months they would be put to the test in combat conditions on all Germany's main battlefronts.

Augsburg-built Me 210 Wk-Nr 0110182 2H+AT of the evaluation unit *Erprobungsgruppe* 210 (the Luftwaffe's dedicated type testing unit) is caught in an air-to-air pass that shows the elegant and well-proportioned lines of the aircraft. Ultimately, assessment of the Me 210 by the unit was mixed, although senior officers concluded that it could be regarded as a 'viable aircraft' (*EN Archive*)

With the Sicilian hills forming a backdrop to their airfield at Trapani, three Me 210A-1s of III./ZG 1 taxi out for a sortie, probably in early 1943. The leading machine is not identified, but the second was assigned to 7. *Staffel* and retained its factory code of DI+NB. The last aircraft, Wk-Nr 0170 2N+BR, belonged to 9./ZG 1, and was posted missing while on an operation on 5 April 1943 (*EN Archive*)

CHAPTER THREE

INTO SERVICE

It was not an auspicious start. In early October 1941, the Bf 110-equipped I./SKG 210 made the lengthy return to Landsberg-Lech from the Easterm Front in order to train up and re-equip on the Me 210 under guidance from the *Erprobungsstaffel* 210. Things did not go well. Several of the *Gruppe*'s crews, including airmen with considerable combat-flying experience, were killed during the familiarisation process, and there were numerous crash-landings, forced-landings and engine failures at airfields in Germany and France before it was decided that the Me 210 would not be the aircraft for the unit.

In the meantime, on 4 January 1942, the *Gruppe* had been redesignated I./ZG 1. In the last two weeks of that month alone it suffered eight more aircraft crashes during training, with two Me 210s being written off and the loss of three more aircrew. The causes were attributed to landing and undercarriage problems. The situation had not improved by 9 March, when I./ZG 1 reported that in the space of a week one of its aircraft had incurred damage while taxiing, eight more had crash-landed and another three had crashed while on training flights. Most of these incidents occurred when inexperienced pilots found themselves in flat spins. The last such accident happened on the 9th when Leutnant Gerhard Schwab, formerly of 3./SKG 210, and his radio operator Unteroffizier Karl-Fritz Schröder belly-landed in S9+IL at Tours, in France, due to engine failure.

In his memoirs, Oberfeldwebel Johannes Kaufmann of 3./ZG 1 described this trying period as follows;

'Our less experienced pilots were the first to encounter problems. Accordingly, we transferred from Landsberg to Lechfeld, where facilities provided longer take-off and landing distances. Unfortunately, heavy winter snow hampered this plan, so that we were able to fly from Lechfeld only between 13 January and 2 March 1942. Then, on the afternoon of 2 March, we relocated to Tours. The unit's Me 210 conversion programme consisted of 91 flights totalling around 27 hours, plus an additional four hours while transferring from Lechfeld to Tours and from Regensburg-Obertraubling to Tours. The entire conversion programme consisted of 82 airfield flights, plus three flights involving firing practice, three bomb drops, one dive and the two ferry flights.

'While I was approaching Tours from Regensburg, I observed something very strange. A number of crashed aircraft lay scattered around the airfield, which appeared to be new and which seemed to be Me 210s. At first I was not sure about this, but upon landing I was informed what had happened. These crashes were entirely down to young, still inexperienced pilots. This forced a revision of plans. It happened relatively quickly. The Me 210 was withdrawn from service, and we had to revert back to the Bf 110 and take it to Russia for the summer offensive of 1942. The whole airfield was deeply disappointed by this.'

On 10 March Göring ordered that all Me 210s intended for delivery to ZG 1 and eventually ZG 2 were to be replaced. I./ZG 1 returned to the Eastern Front under the command of Major Ulrich Diesing, who, it will be recalled from the previous chapter, would give such a damning indictment of the Me 210's capabilities in March before Göring and Messerschmitt. The Me 210 was replaced in I./ZG 1 with the new Bf 110F-2.

Over the winter of 1941-42 a small number of Me 210A-1s were also assigned to the 'new' II./ZG 1 based at Bryansk on the central sector of the Eastern Front northeast of Kiev, which had been reformed from II./SKG 10. The *Gruppe* operated the aircraft alongside its Bf 110s between January and March 1942, but what effectiveness it had, if any at all, is debatable. The Me 210s returned to Germany in March and the *Gruppe* reverted entirely to operating the Bf 110.

Meanwhile, the search for how best to use the Me 210 continued. On 9 May 1942, having held further discussions with Jeschonnek on the deployment of the aircraft, Göring decreed that it should be assessed primarily as a fast-bomber (in effect a fighter-bomber) and as a nightfighter. On 24 May, nightfighter ace and *Kommandeur* of I./NJG 1 Hauptmann Werner Streib visited Lechfeld in order to assess whether or not the Me 210 could be deployed successfully as a nightfighter. Streib felt that it could indeed fulfil this demanding role, and three Me 210s were duly allocated for nightfighter trials. Milch, however, was of the firm view that such tasking could only be undertaken satisfactorily if the necessary modifications to turn it into an operational aircraft could be assured.

Two days before Streib travelled to Lechfeld, Jeschonnek's office issued the following instruction concerning the Me 210;

'1. Employment against the British Isles, particularly against targets which are to be destroyed, will cease.

Highly decorated ace and *Kommandeur* of I./NJG 1 Hauptmann Werner Streib was ordered by *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring to assess whether or not the Me 210 could be deployed successfully as a nightfighter. Streib, who would survive the war with 66 victories to his name, duly reported that the aircraft could indeed fulfil this demanding role (*EN Archive*)

'2. Employment in the East or in sectors of the front far remote from a home base during mobile warfare is not considered advisable since the question of the readiness of these aircraft for action is still open to debate.

'3. Employment in night and bad weather fighter operations is desired and important in view of the total defence situation and of the reinforcement of the nightfighter defences which will certainly be necessary in 1943. For this purpose, the result of these tests should be submitted to the XII. *Fliegerkorps* as soon as possible.

'4. To create a solid basis for the experimentation regarding the construction programme and the production which is to begin now, the intentions of the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff are clearly defined as follows:

'a) The intention to establish an Me 210 *Staffel* for commitment against maritime targets in the English Channel and off the coasts of eastern and southern England within the framework of a fighter-bomber *Gruppe* is upheld. According to a verbal agreement between the *Generalluftzeugmeister* and the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, the aircraft required for such a unit are to be made available as soon as possible.

'b) Bombload is to consist of 2 x 250 kg or 2 x 500 kg bombs for diving, gliding and low-level attacks. Therefore, bomb racks for 8 x 50 kg bombs will not, for the time being, be required in addition to the number of racks already manufactured.'

At the *Generalluftzeugmeister* conference on 25 May, Milch relayed the General Staff's view that one *Staffel* of Me 210s should be assigned as an anti-shipping unit over the English Channel, with another deployed on convoy protection from Norway. Beyond that, any available production could be allocated to nightfighter units. However, all this was thrown into doubt just a few days later when, on 9 June, Milch was informed that Jeschonnek now saw the role of the available Me 210s as being as a heavy fighter in the East – a strange view given I./ZG 1's recent unhappy experience with the aircraft in France!

In July 1942, the *Erprobungsstaffel* 210, under its *Staffelkapitän*, Oberleutnant Walter Maurer, transferred to Evreux, in France, from where it was planned to carry out operational trials, as well as to conduct some experimental night sorties, anti-shipping missions and reconnaissance flights over England. However, in what was becoming a familiar story, the unit quickly suffered inordinate casualties in aircraft and crews.

On 1 September 1942, the *Staffel* was redesignated as 16./KG 6 and was transferred to Soesterberg. Five days later, Oberleutnant Maurer and his radio operator, Feldwebel Rudolf Jansen, took off from the Dutch airfield bound for England on a bombing mission in Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2321 2H+HA. They were accompanied by Feldwebel Heinrich Mösges and Obergefreiter Edouard Czerny in A-1 Wk-Nr 2348 2H+CA.

Maurer was a veteran of the *Legion Condor*, having flown the Bf 109 with 1.J/88. Upon the outbreak of World War 2 he was assigned to Bf 109D-equipped *Stab* I./ZG 2, before being moved to 3. *Staffel* and claiming his first victory. However, on 11 May 1940, during initial operations over France and flying a Bf 110, Maurer was shot down by RAF Hurricanes of No 1 Sqn, crashing near Vendresse and being captured. Released after France's capitulation the following month, he

was subsequently assigned to ZG 76 and then eventually transferred to the *Stab* II./SKG 210 after it was established from the former unit's III. *Gruppe Stab*. In October 1941, after a period on the Eastern Front, Maurer was assigned to the *Erprobungsstaffel* 210, taking command of that unit around May 1942.

In an episode of coincidence, Maurer was once more to encounter aircraft from No 1 Sqn on 6 September 1942, the unit having just completed conversion from Hurricanes to Typhoons at Acklington, in Northumberland, two days earlier. The engagement would be the first between the RAF and the Me 210.

At 1116 hrs, two Typhoon IBs of No 1 Sqn's Blue Section, flown by New Zealander Plt Off D P Perrin and Plt Off G B Bridges, were vectored northwards towards the Farne Islands and then south to Blyth at 20,000 ft. They were then ordered by ground control to ascend to 30,000 ft, and a few moments later at 1143 hrs, while still climbing over the sea off Redcar, they spotted the two Me 210s flying to the northwest at the same height in a weaving pattern. The German aircraft then turned west, remaining straight and level, some 1500 yards from the two British fighters, which duly gave chase.

Evidently, the Messerschmitt crews were aware of their pursuers, for one of them jettisoned their bombs before both aircraft turned steeply back east. At this the two Typhoon pilots each targeted an Me 210. Perrin dived after Mösges' aircraft and closed in to 250 yards before firing a two-second burst from astern and slightly to port from his 20 mm cannon, observing strikes and pieces flying off the right-hand Daimler-Benz engine. Perrin crossed over and fired another burst with the same effect, before speeding past the Me 210 while firing a third burst of one to two seconds from 100 yards down to 50 yards from centre dead astern. The enemy aircraft's rudder caught fire before falling apart.

Mösges' Messerschmitt quickly rolled over onto its back and dived vertically with Perrin still in pursuit. But in trying to keep sight of the Me 210, which by this stage was diving beyond the vertical at a speed of 520 mph at 20,000-25,000 ft, Perrin blacked out. He regained consciousness at 3000 ft off Hartlepool, his Typhoon having suffered some damage during its dive. Perrin considered bailing out, only to discover that the safety catches had come away from the Typhoon's starboard cockpit door, which was now loose and 'hammering violently in the slipstream'. He nevertheless stayed with his aircraft and searched the sea for a few minutes, spotting a launch which seemed to be searching for the German aircraft. Perrin then returned to base.

Meanwhile, Plt Off Bridges had followed Maurer's Me 210, which had banked to the right and was climbing gently at about 300-400 ft per minute for about 700-900 ft. As Maurer turned, Bridges closed in and fired a short deflection burst from the left quarter at long range to test his cannon. He could not make out the effect, if any, but the Messerschmitt went into a left turn, before diving towards the southeast. The Typhoon began to close rapidly and Bridges fired two or three bursts at approximately 200 yards from the left quarter astern, observing strikes between the left engine and the fuselage and along the top of the fuselage and canopy. Pieces then flew away from the engine and it began to stream

white smoke, while the aircraft weaved violently. Bridges fired a final burst from 100 yards down to 50 yards from dead astern and slightly to the left.

As more pieces broke away from the stricken Me 210, its left Daimler-Benz engine caught fire and it went into a steep dive. Bridges throttled back and, turning steeply, blacked out like Perrin as the fighter entered into a spin. He thus lost sight of the enemy aircraft. Bridges came to at 4000 ft and flew over the North Sea east of Whitby for about five minutes. He too spotted a launch heading towards 'a long patch on the sea' that was thought to be the location of Mösges' crash. He then made course for Acklington. At no point did either Me 210 return fire.

An armed British 'Tommy' stands guard over the twisted remains of Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2348 2H+CA from 16./KG 6 at Fell Briggs Farm, near Marske-by-the-Sea in Yorkshire. It had been shot down by a Typhoon of No 1 Sqn on 6 September 1942. Although both crewmen – Feldwebel Heinrich Mösges and Obergefreiter Edouard Czerny – bailed out, they were killed when their parachutes failed to open prior to them hitting the ground (*Tony Holmes Collection*)

Oberleutnant Maurer and Feldwebel Jansen bailed out, while their aircraft crashed at Sunnyside Farm near Fylingthorpe, in Yorkshire. Both crewmen were captured. Mösges and Czerny bailed out as well but their parachutes failed and they were killed when they hit the ground at Fell Briggs Farm near Marske-by-the-Sea, also in Yorkshire. The Typhoon pilots each claimed an Me 210 destroyed.

Future operations by *Erprobungsstaffel* 210 were spasmodic, and by 20 September *Luftflotte* 3 reported that the unit numbered just five Me 210s, of which three were serviceable. At the beginning of October the *Staffel* was designated as 11./ZG 1, which would become the new *Erprobungsstaffel* 410 in December.

In October 1942, after service in the Soviet Union and North Africa, III./ZG 1, which had formed at the beginning of that year at Lechfeld from reconnaissance pilots and newly operationally-ready pilots from the training schools, was disbanded at Bir el Abd, in Egypt, and a new *Gruppe* of the same name established at Trapani, in Sicily. The old *Gruppe* had been equipped with Bf 109E-7 *Jabo* (*Jagdbombers* – fighter-bombers), but the new unit took on the Me 210A-1 with a cadre of crews drawn from elements of 10. and 16./KG 40 and *Seeaufklärungsgruppe* 128. It was intended to be deployed from Sicily to North Africa, where the unit would undertake the *Zerstörer*, fast-bomber and occasional reconnaissance roles with the Me 210. This would be the first time that the aircraft had been operationally tested in anything like large numbers.

From November 1942, the German position in North Africa became increasingly perilous following the launching of Operation *Torch* by the Allies, which had committed more than 100,000 men to an invasion of Vichy French Morocco and Algeria with the intention of getting US ground forces into the war there. Further pressure came when the British Eighth Army broke through Generalfeldmarschall Erwin Rommel's defences on 2 November and Tobruk was abandoned. These events were immediately followed by a month of ever-dwindling fuel supply for the *Deutsch-Italienische*

The crews of three Me 210s from III./ZG 1 prepare for a mission over the Mediterranean from Trapani. The aircraft furthest from the camera was 2N+AS of 8. *Staffel*. The pilot in the aircraft at right is at cockpit readiness, and he is wearing a lifejacket for over-water operations. The canopies of these Me 210s have been reinforced with armoured glass panels (*EN Archive*)

Panzerarmee as it fought to hold on to Cyrenaica. To make matters worse for the Axis powers, the British had also attained air superiority over the coast as far as the Gulf of Sidra.

Nevertheless, at 0900 hrs on 12 November, Me 210s of 8./ZG 1 took off from Trapani to attack Allied landing vessels at Djidjelli, in Algeria, while 11. *Staffel* struck similar targets at Bougie, again on the Algerian coast. Despite enemy fighters being encountered, all the Messerschmitts returned safely. They repeated these attacks the following day, although this time three Me 210s were lost. The aircraft flown by Oberleutnant Philipp Bender (2N+CR) and Unteroffizier Hans Krüger, respectively, fell to Spitfires, while Wk-Nr 0163 force-landed in Axis-held territory. Badly damaged, it had to be destroyed.

The Me 210's time in Sicily and North Africa was dogged by engine problems, high levels of unserviceability and crew casualties. Another early loss was Oberleutnant Heinz Redlich, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./ZG 1 and a recipient of the *Ehrenpokal* (Honour Goblet of the Luftwaffe), who, with his radio operator, Feldwebel Heinz Hamburger, was shot down by naval anti-aircraft fire off Tobruk in Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 0036 2N+GS on 18 November.

During the last days of November German ground forces halted the Allied advance and regained the offensive in Tunisia. As part of these operations, on the afternoon of the 24th, Me 210s claimed 20 enemy trucks destroyed in a strafing attack. This success was negated the following day when the *Gruppe* lost one aircraft from 7. *Staffel* and two others had to force-land badly damaged near Tunis following aerial combat. A fourth Me 210 suffered 30 per cent damage when it was shot up at Trapani.

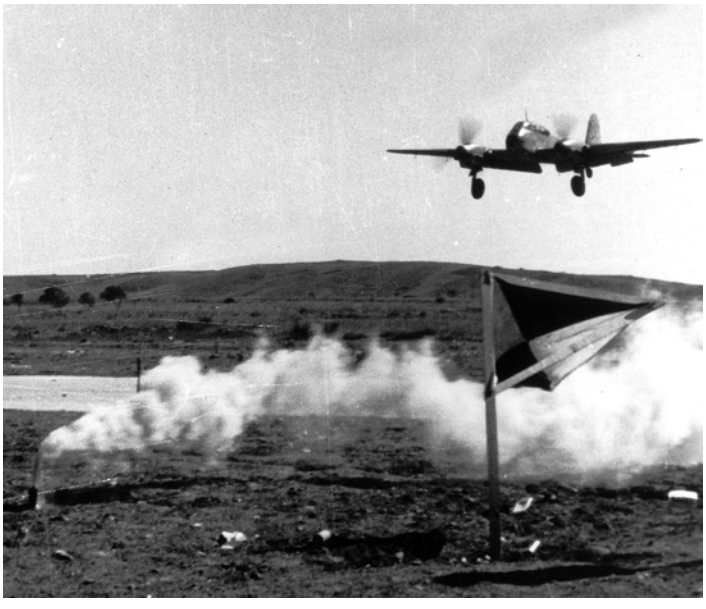
The aircraft shot down was crewed by Leutnant Walter Hanke and radio operator Gefreiter Heinrich Auer, who were both killed when Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 0073 2N+DR fell to anti-aircraft fire west of Medjez el Bab. That town in northern Tunisia would also be the location for the loss of A-1 Wk-Nr 0155 2N+BR, flown by Hauptmann Kurt Loos, the *Staffelkapitän* of 7./ZG 1. Loos, also a recipient of the *Ehrenpokal* as well as the German Cross in Gold, was killed when his aircraft was shot down by a Spitfire southwest of the town. Loos' radio operator, Oberfeldwebel Heinz Schrodt, was captured.

On the 28th, in a day of intense aerial action over Tunisia, a formation of 37 B-17s from the USAAF's 97th and 301st BGs carried out a raid on Sidi Ahmed airfield. In the main, German response was effected by the Bf 109s of JG 53 and Fw 190 *Jabos* of III./ZG 2, but at least one Me 210, A-1 2N+RV, flown by Flieger Stabsing Heinz Pfister of 11./ZG 1, was airborne at 1040 hrs. Indeed, Pfister claimed damage to one of the American

bombers prior to being forced to belly land his battle-damaged aircraft two kilometres from Bizerta. He and his radio operator, Obergefreiter Günther Weber, returned safely.

The next day, 11. *Staffel* lost its *Staffelkapitän* when Hauptmann Friedrich Plank, who had previously served on the *Stab* of SKG 210, was shot down by a P-38 20 km south of Tunis. Plank had suffered wounds on the Eastern Front in July 1941 while flying a Bf 110, but he was now posted missing.

On 1 December German armoured units launched a major counter-offensive against Tebourba and Chouigui, and the local Luftwaffe air command, *Fliegerführer Tunis*, deployed its strike force against the enemy in the Chouigui area. Together with Ju 88s, Ju 87s and Fw 190 fighter-bombers, III./ZG 1 flew six sorties during the morning, while on the 3rd the Me 210s mounted 14 sorties.



Its Daimler-Benz engines roaring, an Me 210 of III./ZG 1 approaches a Sicilian landing ground with the aid of a marker flare. With its fast landing speed, effecting a smooth, trouble-free touch-down, the aircraft could be a challenge even for experienced pilots, especially on rougher surfaces (*EN Archive*)

In addition to their fast-bombing missions, the Me 210s of III./ZG 1 also provided 'fighter' escort to large formations of Ju 52/3m transports as they flew badly needed supplies from Sicily into El Aouina. Possibly damaged during one such mission on the 2nd was Me 210 Wk-Nr 0057 2N+DT, flown by Unteroffizier Gustav Naumann, when it engaged in combat with a P-38 near Tebourba.

The *Gruppe* suffered a setback in the afternoon of 4 December when its Me 210s clashed with P-38s of the 48th FS/14th FG while flying a reconnaissance mission over Faid. One Messerschmitt was lost to enemy action when the unlucky Flieger Stabsing Pfister and Obergefreiter Günther Weber of 11. *Staffel* went down in 2N+QV. When Leutnant Alwin Meyer of 9./ZG 1 returned to Kastelli airfield from this combat already wounded along with his radio operator, Unteroffizier Karl Morgenröther, in their Wk-Nr 0071 2N+AT, they were forced to crash-land due to hydraulics failure.

The P-38s were proving to be the nemesis of the Me 210 in Tunisia. On the morning of the 6th Leutnant Fritz Malt and Unteroffizier Fritz Meiser were shot down in Wk-Nr 0246 '100 km west of Sfax', possibly by Capt Ralph L Knapp of the 49th FS/14th FG, who claimed a 'Ju 88' near Faid. Malt was a graduate of the *Zerstörerschule* at Schleissheim and had flown with IV./ZG 26 and I./NJG 4 prior to joining III./ZG 1 in September 1942.

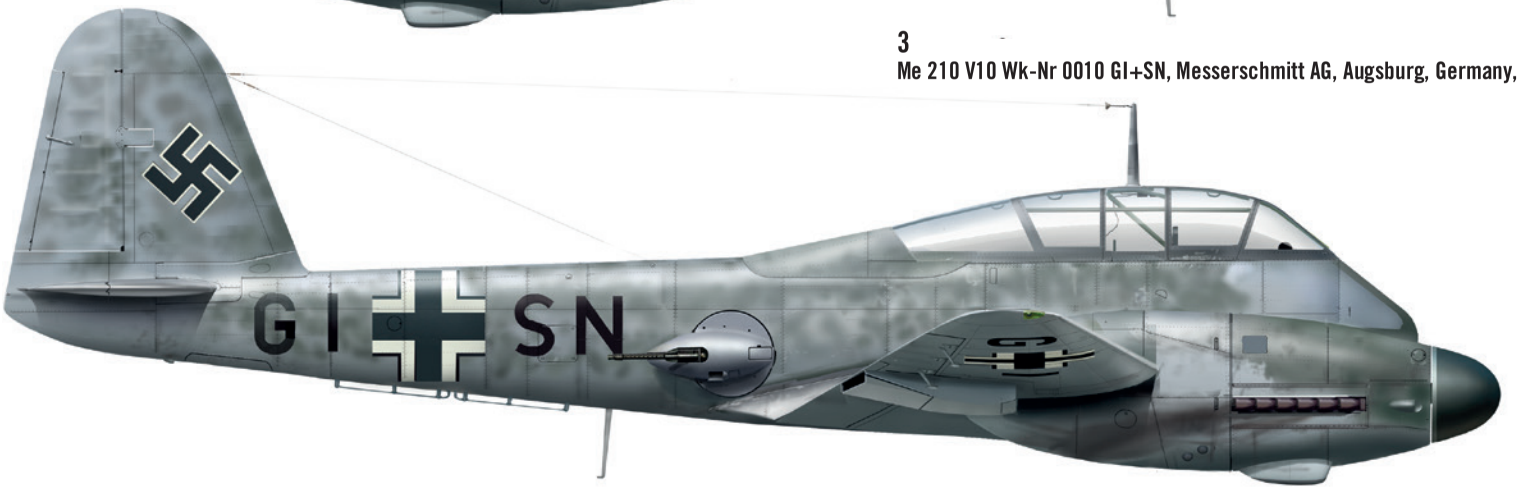
The trickiness of the Me 210 was highlighted on 22 December when the *Staffelkapitän* of 8./ZG 1, Hauptmann Heinrich Sass, and his radio operator Feldwebel Rudolf Blandowski crashed in Wk-Nr 0088 2N+GS while taking off from Trapani. Both men perished – they were buried at Motta St Anastasia, west of Catania. (*text continues on page 42*)

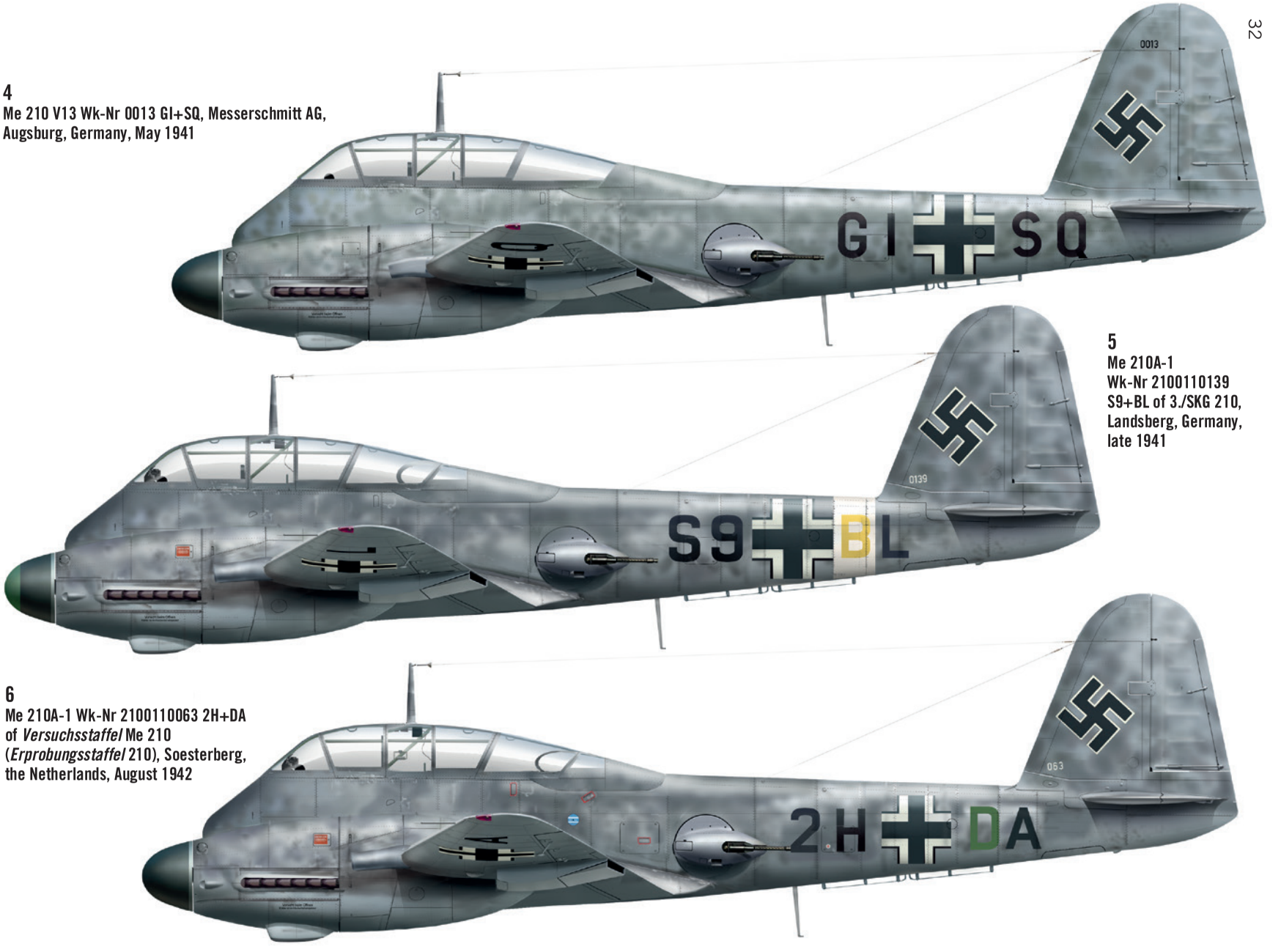
COLOUR PLATES

1
Me 210 V1 Wk-Nr 0001 D-AABF, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, October 1939

2
Me 210 V2 Wk-Nr 0002 CE+BZ, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, July-September 1940

3
Me 210 V10 Wk-Nr 0010 GI+SN, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, June 1941



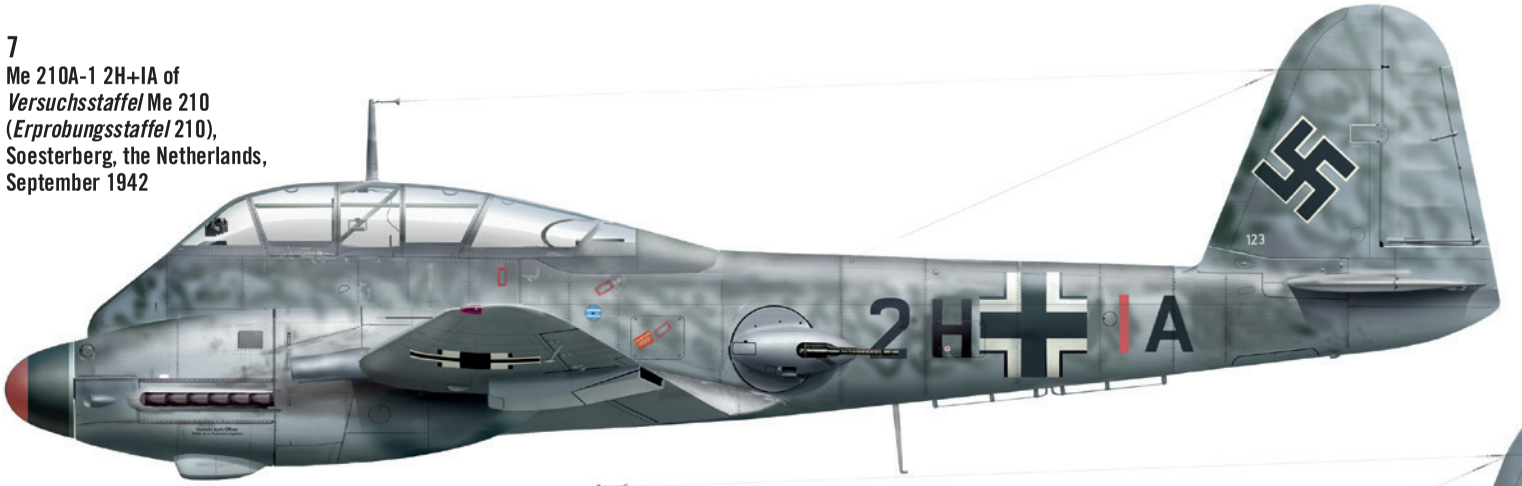


4
Me 210 V13 Wk-Nr 0013 GI+SQ, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, May 1941

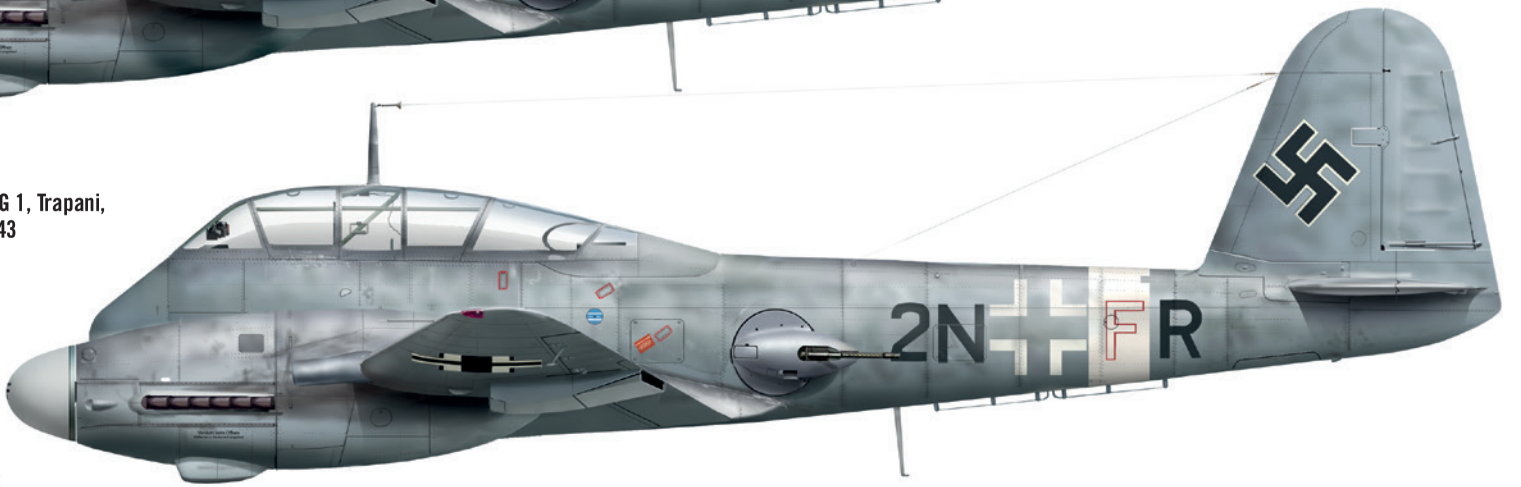
5
Me 210A-1
Wk-Nr 2100110139
S9+BL of 3./SKG 210, Landsberg, Germany, late 1941

6
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2100110063 2H+DA of *Versuchsstaffel* Me 210 (*Erprobungsstaffel* 210), Soesterberg, the Netherlands, August 1942

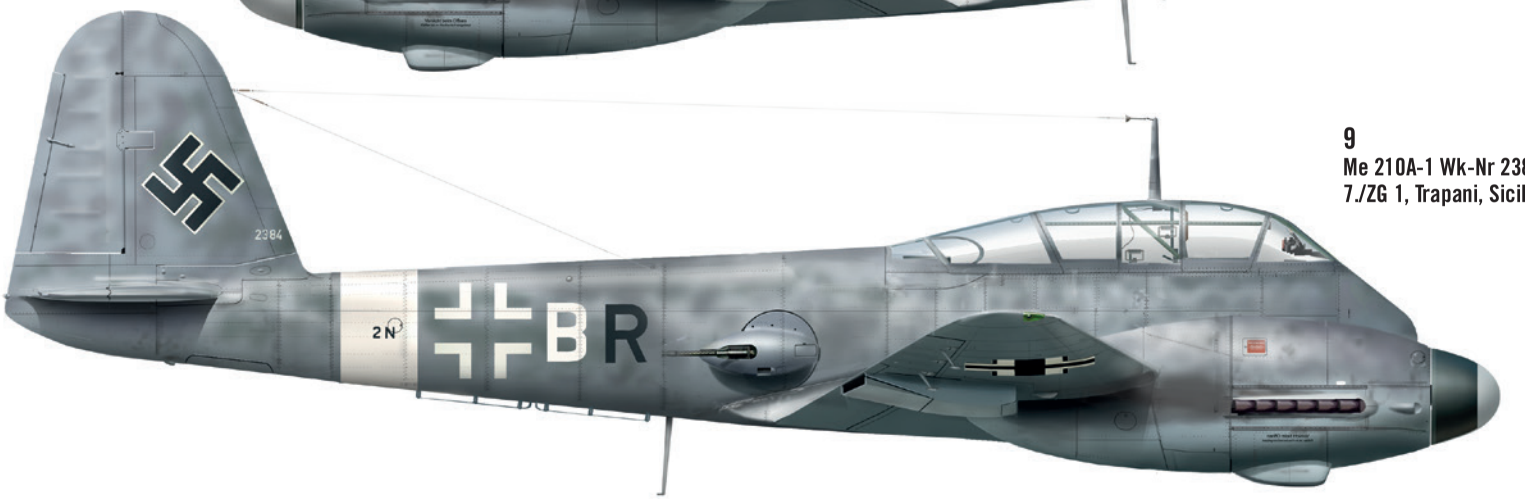
7
Me 210A-1 2H+IA of
Versuchsstaffel Me 210
(*Erprobungsstaffel* 210),
Soesterberg, the Netherlands,
September 1942

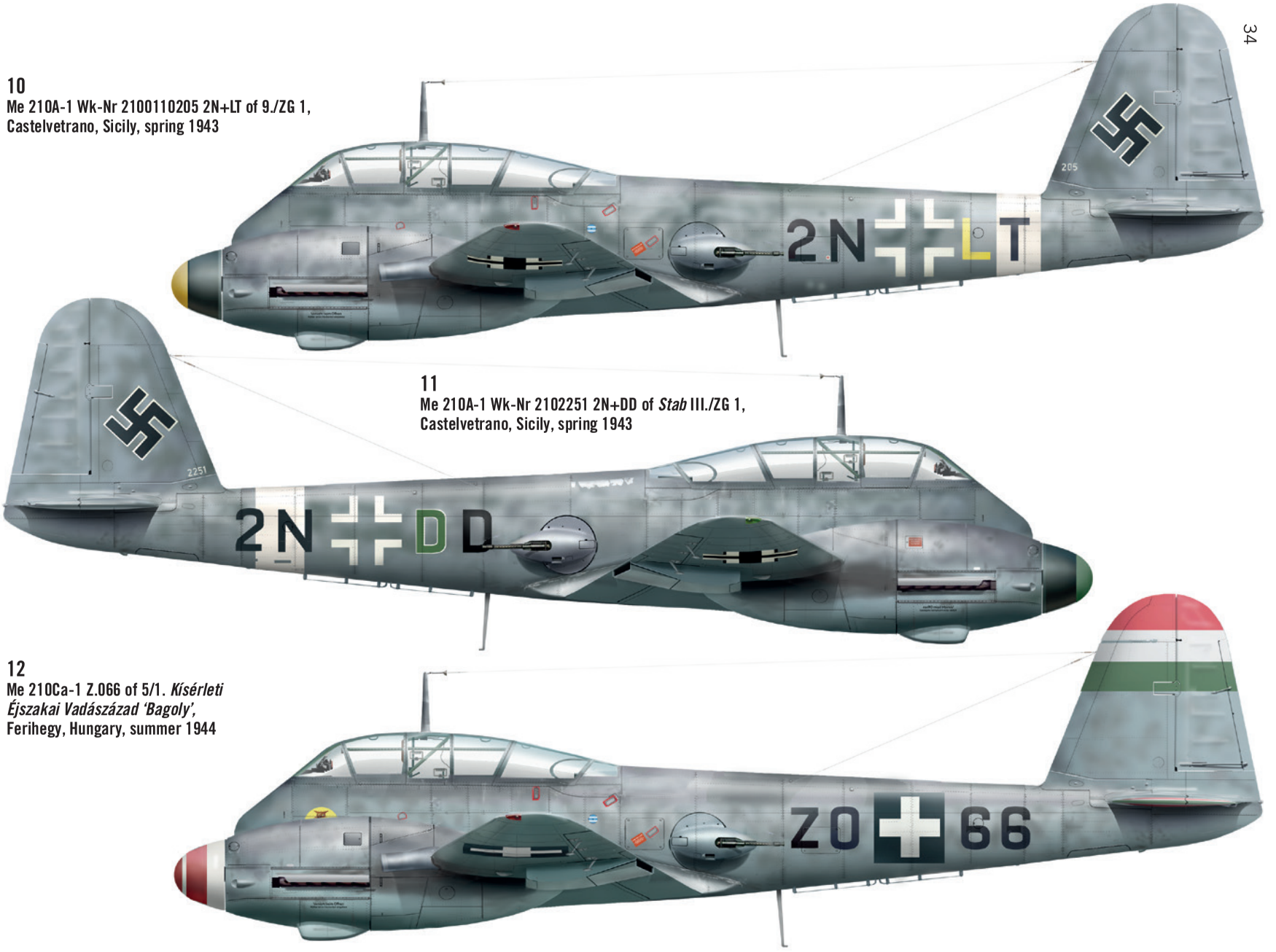


8
Me 210A-1 2N+FR of 7./ZG 1, Trapani,
Sicily, late 1942/early 1943



9
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2384 2N+BR of
7./ZG 1, Trapani, Sicily, late 1942



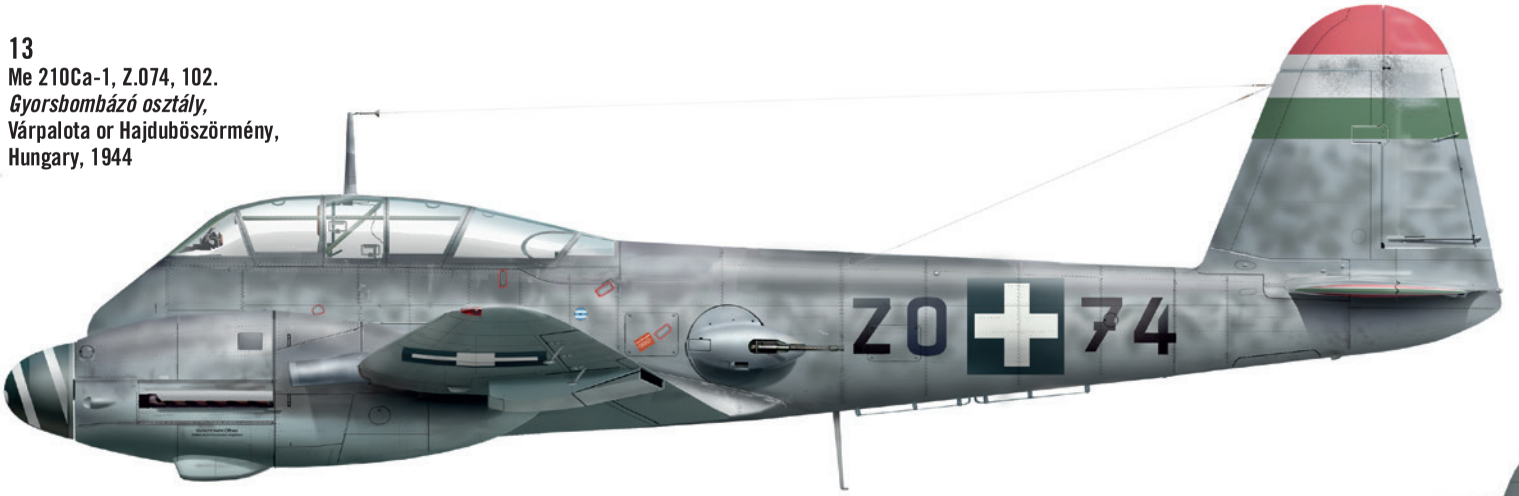


10
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2100110205 2N+LT of 9./ZG 1,
Castelvetrano, Sicily, spring 1943

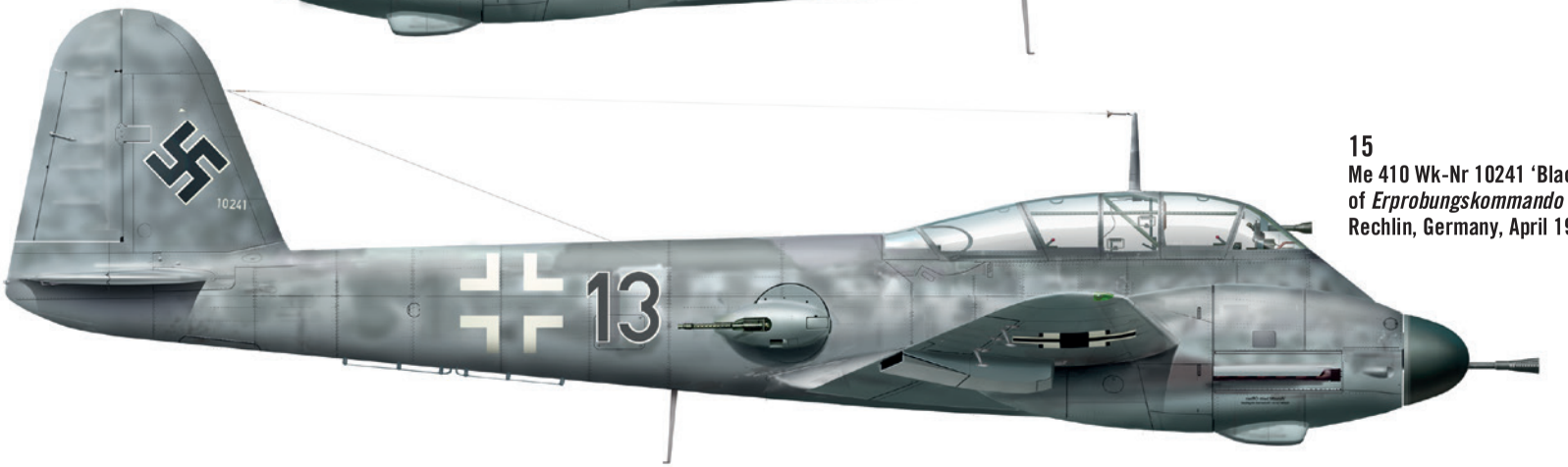
11
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2102251 2N+DD of *Stab* III./ZG 1,
Castelvetrano, Sicily, spring 1943

12
Me 210Ca-1 Z.066 of 5/1. *Kísérleti Éjszakai Vadászázad 'Bagoly'*,
Ferihegy, Hungary, summer 1944

13
Me 210Ca-1, Z.074, 102.
Gyorsbombázó osztály,
Várpalota or Hajduböszörmény,
Hungary, 1944



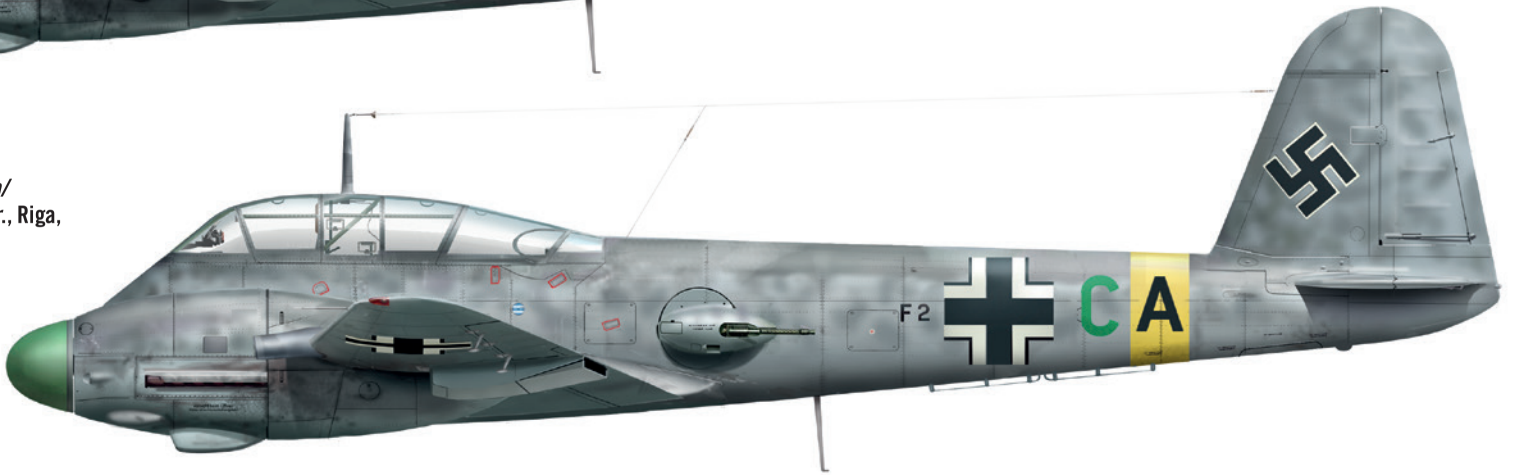
14
Me 410 V1 Wk-Nr 027 DI+NW, Messerschmitt AG,
Augsburg, 1942



15
Me 410 Wk-Nr 10241 'Black 13'
of *Erprobungskommando* 25,
Rechlin, Germany, April 1944

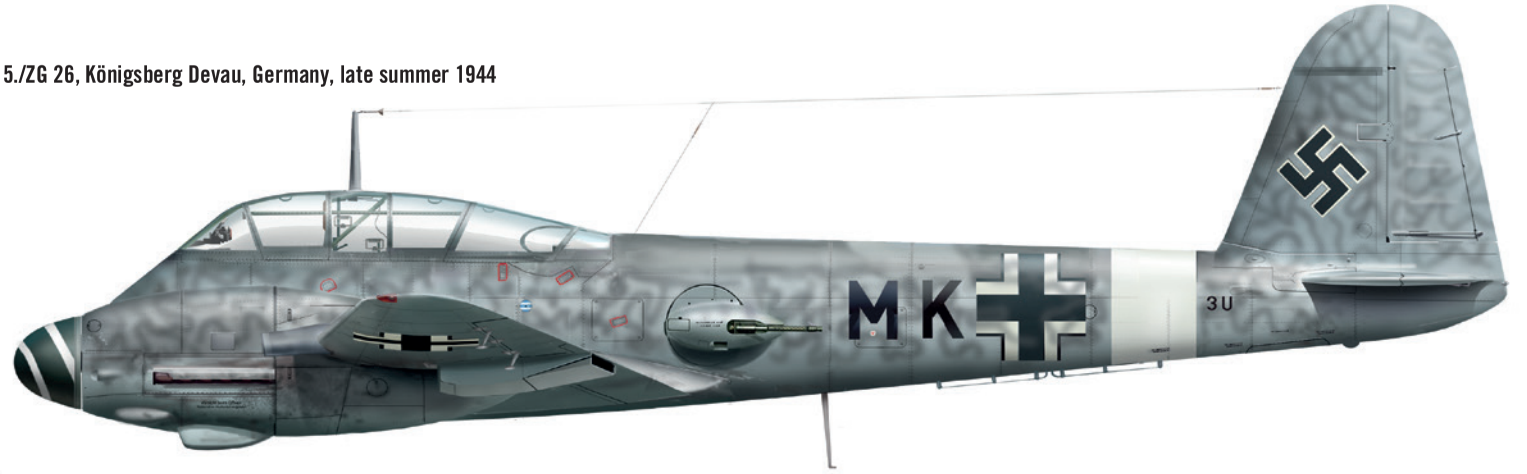
16
Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 10259 F6+OK of 2./(F) 122, Monte Corvino, Italy, November 1943

17
Me 410A-3 F2+CA of *Stab/ Ergänzungsgruppe.(F). Gr.*, Riga, Latvia, spring 1944



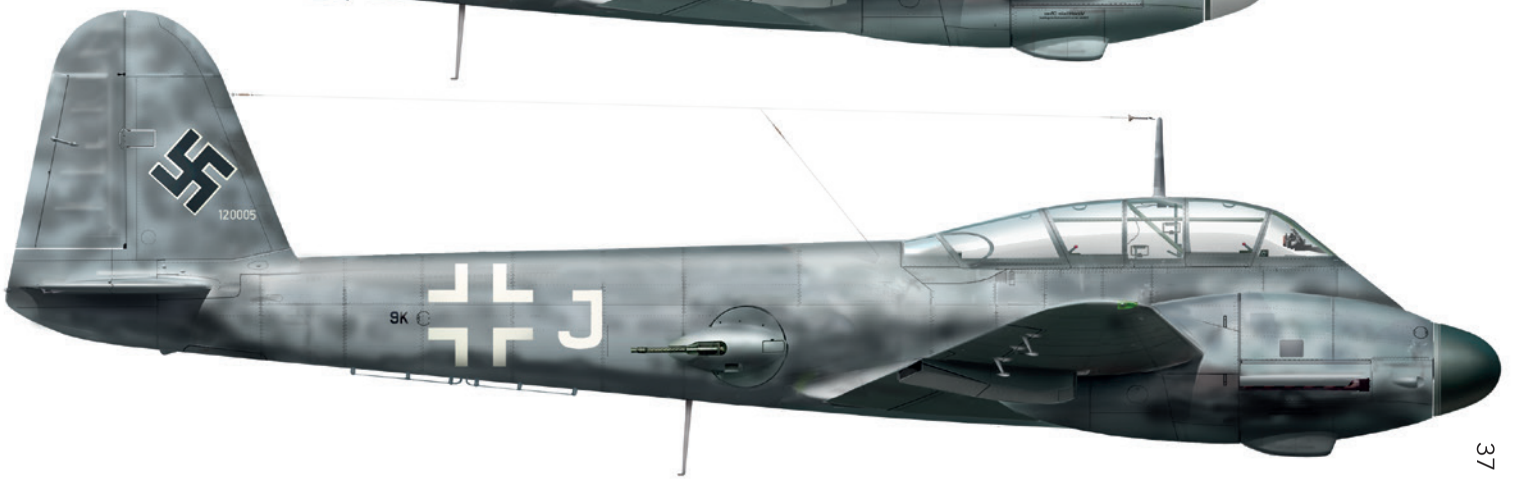
18
Me 410A-1/U2 Wk-Nr 266 2N+AD of *Stab* III./ZG 1, possibly at Vorden, the Netherlands, September-October 1943

19
Me 410A-1/U2 3U+MK of 5./ZG 26, Königsberg Devau, Germany, late summer 1944



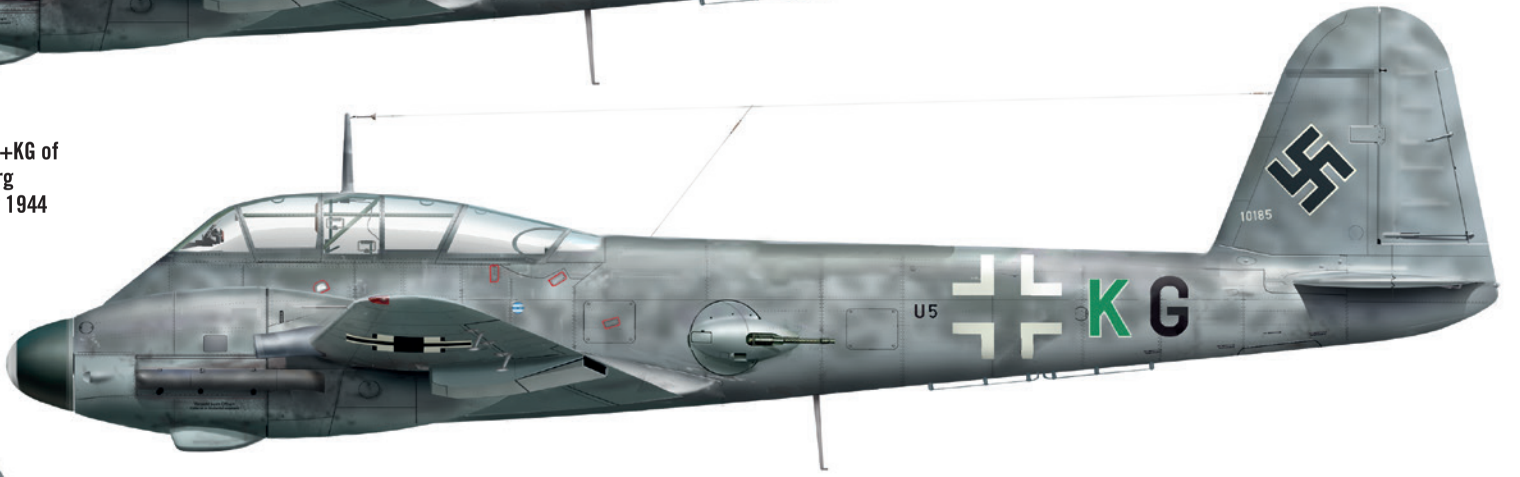
20
Me 410A-3 7A+MH of 1.(F)/121, possibly at an airfield in France, 1944

21
Me 410A-1
Wk-Nr 120005 9K+JH of 1./KG 51, northern France, early 1944



22
Me 410A-1/U3 Wk-Nr 10117 'Yellow 7' of II./ZG 26, Hildesheim, Germany, February 1944

23
Me 410A Wk-Nr 10185 U5+KG of
Stab **V.(Z)/KG 2, Königsberg**
Neumark, Germany, early 1944

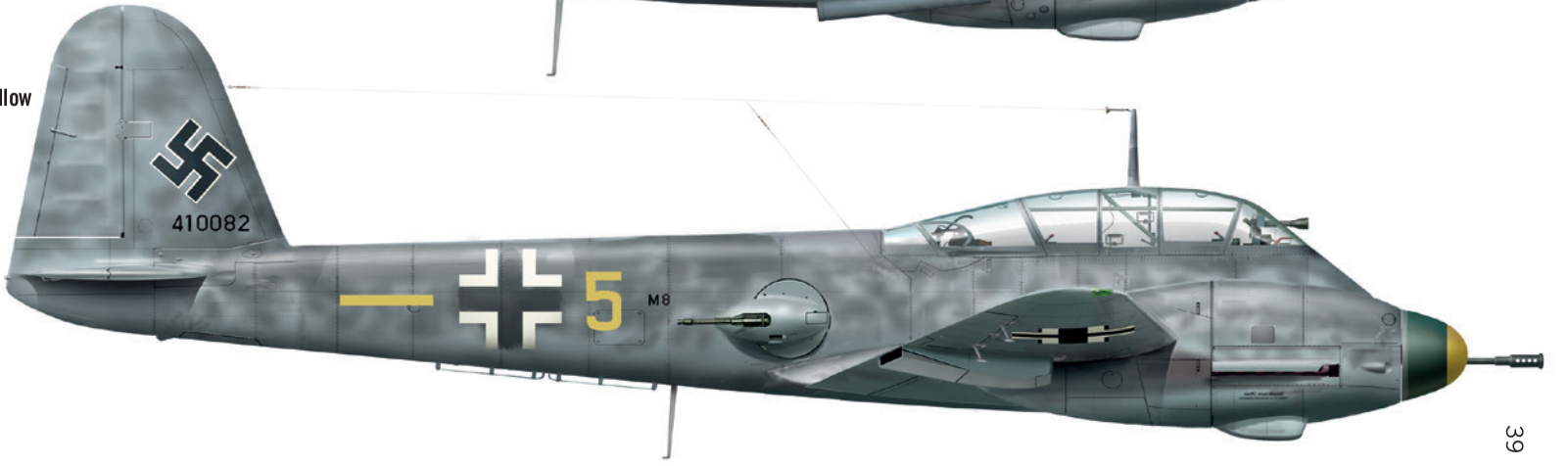


24
Me 210A-0(1) Wk-Nr 2100110049
2N+FR of 7./ZG 1, Wels, Austria,
early 1944

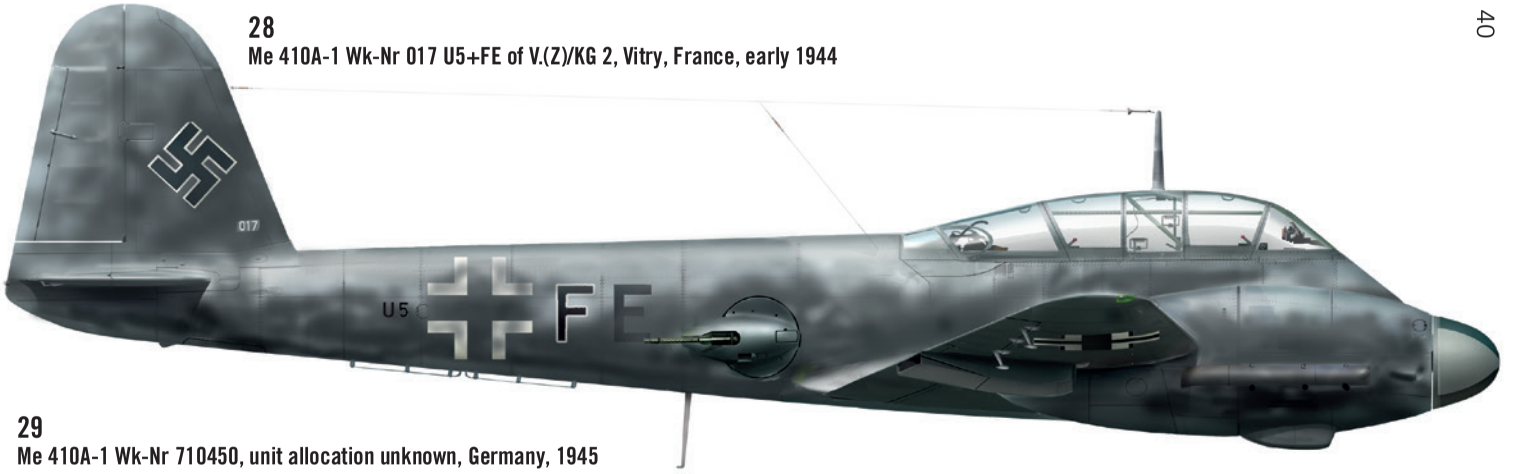
25
Me 410A-1/U4 Wk-Nr 420481 3U+LP of 6./ZG 26, Königsberg Neumark, Germany, April 1944

26
Me 410A-1/U4 Wk-Nr 420292 3U+CC of *Stab* II./ZG 26, Königsberg Neumark, Germany, May 1944

27
Me 410A-1/U4(?) Wk-Nr 410082 'Yellow 5' of II./ZG 76, Seerappen, Germany, autumn 1944



28
Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 017 U5+FE of V.(Z)/KG 2, Vitry, France, early 1944



29
Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 710450, unit allocation unknown, Germany, 1945

30
Me 410A Wk-Nr 263 of No 601 Sqn (formerly 2N+HT of ZG 76), Gerbini, Sicily, August 1943

VULNERABILITY & ARMAMENT DIAGRAM

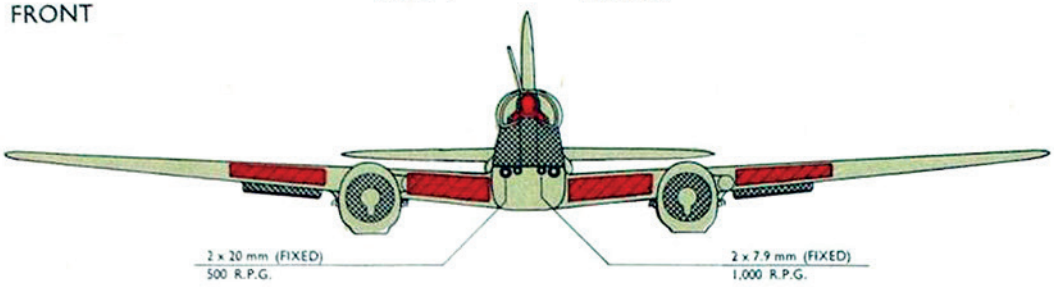
MESSERSCHMITT Me 410

(2 x D.B. 603)

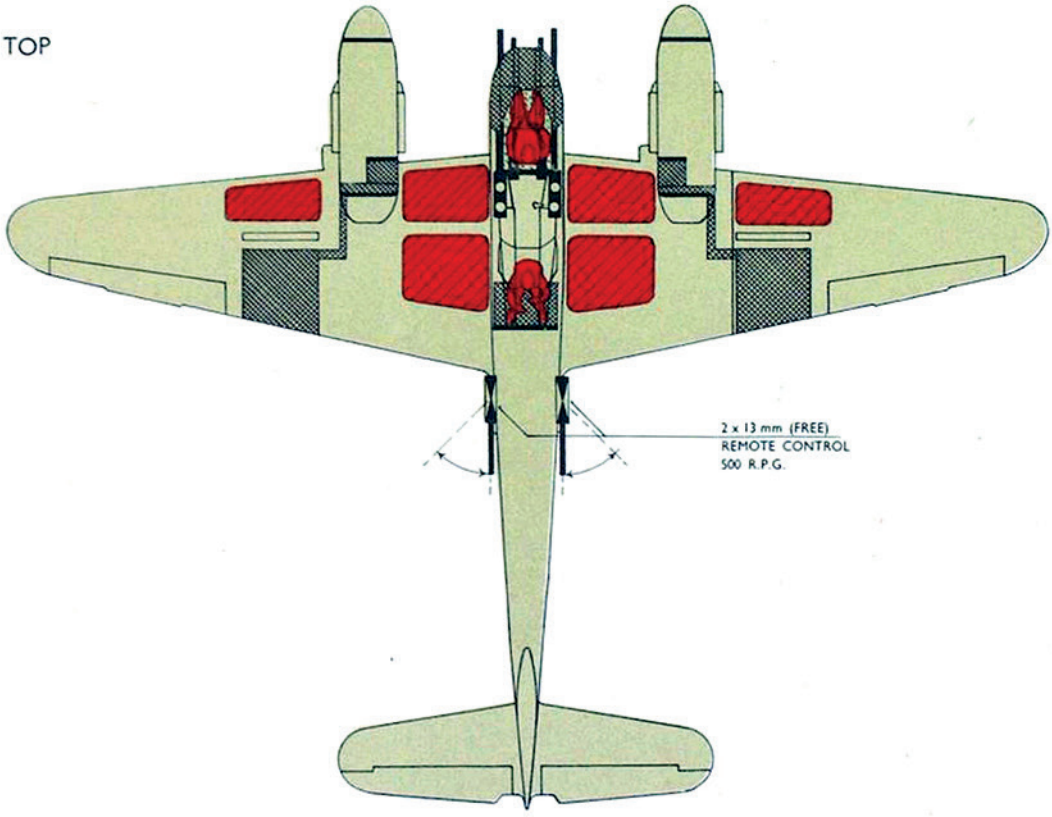
FIGHTER-BOMBER

SPAN 53' 9" LENGTH 40' 3"

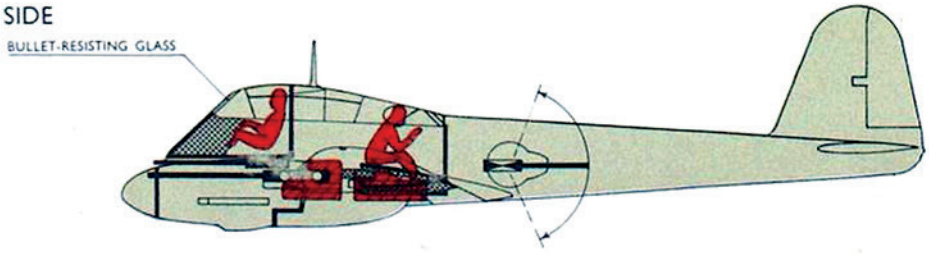
FRONT



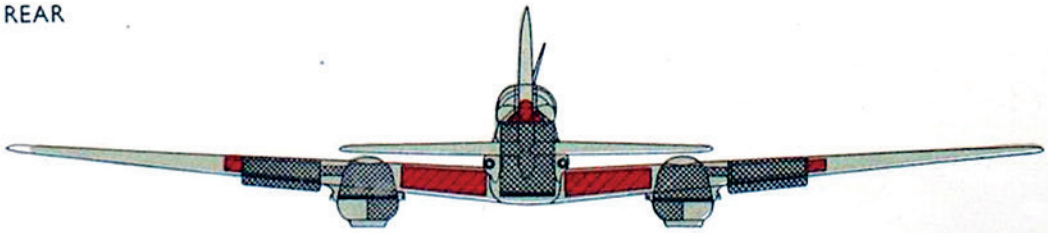
TOP



SIDE



REAR



III./ZG 1 despatched six aircraft on a fruitless anti-shipping mission over the Gulf of Hammamet on the 24th, but in doing so they ran into Spitfires of No 126 Sqn. Flt Lt J H Long and Sgt A C Hunter lodged claims for one shot down (Long) and two damaged (Long and Hunter), although only one aircraft from 11. *Staffel* was lost when the Me 210 of Unteroffizier Klaus Leibrandt and Gefreiter Heinz Zobel was shot down 15 km east of the Tunisian port of Sousse.

As 1942 gave way to 1943, the fighting in Tunisia became even more desperate for the Axis as they fought to retain a meaningful presence in the theatre. On 6 March three German armoured divisions, two light divisions and nine Italian divisions launched Operation *Capri* – an initiative intended to retake Medenine so as to halt the westward advance of the Eighth Army and to link up with the Italian First Army in order to hopefully create a resurgence of Axis fortunes in the Western Desert.

Despite inclement weather, Me 210s of III./ZG 1 appeared in some strength over the battlefield in support of the Axis advance from the 6th, when the *Gruppe* mounted a bombing attack on Neffatia airfield in southeastern Tunisia. However, 7. *Staffel*'s Wk-Nr 2314 2N+BD, flown by Unteroffiziere Johannes Häring and Ernst Bonnrath, fell victim to a Spitfire 50 km north of Gabes. The next day around 12 of the Messerschmitts returned to Neffatia, where they were attacked by Spitfires from No 1 Sqn SAAF, which claimed to have shot an aircraft down. Certainly, one Me 210 was forced to land and its pilot later died.

A pair of Me 210s from 7./ZG 1 attacked P-38s escorting B-26 Marauders out to bomb Siebel ferries southwest of Sicily on the 11th. The Messerschmitts struck at one element of Lightnings flying at just 27 m above the sea, after which they turned to attack the leading bombers. One of the B-26s from the 17th BG was shot down, but concurrently Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2316 2N+CS, flown by Feldwebel Karl-Heinz Thiemann with Unteroffizier Alfred Telitzki as radio operator, was hit by fire from one of the P-38s. The Messerschmitt was forced to ditch northwest of the Aegadian Island of Marettimo. Thiemann survived wounded, but Telitzki was killed.

Attrition started to gnaw away at the small number of Me 210s in Africa. On 20 March, Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 0256 was hit by anti-aircraft fire and received 30 per cent damage, forcing its pilot to land at Sfax. Four days later, Wk-Nr 0251 suffered a similar degree of damage following air combat, possibly with a Hurricane, and it was forced to land at Gabes. On 29 March, no fewer than seven Me 210A-1s were damaged at Sfax during an Allied air raid, along with a Bf 110G-2 of III./ZG 26. Two of the Messerschmitts escaped with minor damage, but Wk-Nrs 8157 (GA+YG), 8161 (GA+YK), 8162 (GA+YL) and 8167 (GA+YQ) were deemed to have suffered 80-95 per cent damage.

There was some conciliation on the last day of the month when, during an attack by B-25s in the afternoon on an Axis convoy off Zembra Island in the Gulf of Tunis, Bf 109s of JG 27 and Me 210s of III./ZG 1 went to intercept the Mitchells and their P-38 escorts. Oberleutnant Walter Lardy was successful in shooting down what he claimed as a 'Ventura' some 20 km northeast of Zembra – it is not clear whether his victim was one of two P-38s or two B-25s shot down.

Groundcrew heave on a block and tackle rope that has been secured around the tailwheel of Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 0092 GT+VJ of 9./ZG 1 as they hoist two 250 kg SC 250 bombs into its bomb-bay ahead of another mission. The aircraft has the white tail band of an aircraft serving in the Mediterranean Theatre. Wearing fuselage codes 2N+1T, this aircraft was one of two Me 210s from 9. *Staffel* that were lost in air combat 30 km northwest of Gabes on 6 April 1943. Its crew, Unteroffiziere Gerhard Lemke and Emil Deleh, were both killed (*EN Archive*)

Aside from being detailed to fly escort to Ju 52/3ms carrying supplies from Sicily to Tunisia, Me 210s also covered the return trip when the Junkers tri-motors often ferried out wounded personnel. Such operations were made more challenging when, on 5 April, several Me 210s were damaged during raids on Trapani and Chinisia airfields by B-25s. One Messerschmitt was damaged at the former site and four more at the latter. That day, III./ZG 1 lost two more aircraft in the air when Oberfeldwebel Herbert Hendrich and Unteroffizier Rudolf Kaiser of 8. *Staffel* were shot down in Wr-Nr 0134 2N+FS by a P-38 northwest of Cap Bon, while the aircraft of Unteroffizier Walter Luttka (and his unidentified radio operator), Wk-Nr 0170 2N+BR, also failed to return from a patrol.

The following day, two more Me 210s of 9. *Staffel* were lost in air combat 30 km northwest of Gabes when Unteroffiziere Gerhard Lemke and Emil Deleh, in Wk-Nr 0092 2N+1T, and Unteroffiziere Walter Lübke and Rudolf Müttner (aircraft identity unrecorded) were reported as killed in action.

Late on 9 April, Me 210s of III./ZG 1 engaged in a vicious aerial battle with American-flown Spitfire VCs of the 52nd FG in the Kairouan area. Aircraft from that group's 2nd and 4th FSs were flying a fighter sweep when they bounced what they thought was a formation of 12 'Ju 88s' west of Kairouan. While the 4th FS remained as high cover, the 2nd FS went in to attack, guns blazing, slicing through the surprised German formation. As the squadron finished its attack, the Spitfires of the 4th FS also joined in.

The American pilots subsequently claimed nine German aircraft shot down and a tenth as a probable, although these figures were wildly over-optimistic. In fact, two Me 210A-1s of 7./ZG 1 had been hit, the first when Leutnant Wedige-Bogislav von Glasenapp and his radio operator Unteroffizier Martin Schretzenmeyer went down in Wk-Nr 8170, ten

kilometres north of Kairouan. Both were wounded, but survived, with von Glasenapp going on to fly Me 410s with II./ZG 26 and being credited with four victories.

It was after this action that Leutnant Rudi Dassow (who had shot down one of his attackers) force-landed burning Me 210 Wk-Nr 8169 2N+GR northwest of Bon Thani. Moments after the aircraft made contact with the ground, bombs still being carried by the Me 210 exploded, wounding Dassow and killing his radio operator, Unteroffizier Walter Böhme. A veteran of service with II./ZG 26, Dassow miraculously returned to 7./ZG 1 just a week later. Aside from his Spitfire victory, he had already been credited with the probable shooting down of a Liberator during a raid on Naples on 1 March while on a training flight in an Me 210 of 7./ZG 1. On that occasion his victim may well have been B-24D 41-23789 *Thunderbird* from the 415th BS/98th BG, flown by 1Lt Virgil M Anders, this aircraft being lost and all nine of its crew killed. Dassow received an Italian military decoration following his success on this mission.

On 10 April, as British armour drove on towards Kairouan, Me 210s patrolled ahead of Ju 52/3ms bringing in fuel and supplies. Some two kilometres to the north of Cap Bon, the aircraft (Wk-Nr 0265 2N+MS) of Unteroffiziere Gerhard Melhorn and Otto Sparrer of 8./ZG 1 was shot down by a P-38, as was the Me 210 of Oberleutant Josef Hallerbach and Unteroffizier Kurt Noae of 9. *Staffel*. The latter were flying C-1 Wk-Nr 2276 when it came down in the vicinity of Sousse. Although the former crew was listed as missing, the latter survived. Hallerbach would later fly the Me 410 and then Bf 110 nightfighters with III./NJG 1.

On the 13th, Leutnant Fritz Stehle of 7./ZG 1 claimed a P-38 northwest of Cap Bon. He would be less fortunate a few days later when, on 18 April, his Me 210 (Wk-Nr 0257) was shot down by a P-40, possibly during an escort mission for transports. Stehle did survive, however, and returned to the *Gruppe*. III./ZG 1 had also clashed with Allied fighters the previous day (17 April) near Chinisia, on Sicily, resulting in three Me 210s receiving damage – two of these aircraft had to be belly-landed.

In early 1943 the long-range reconnaissance *Staffel* 2.(F)/*Aufklärungsgruppe* 122 introduced Me 210A-1s into the Mediterranean Theatre for a brief time, flying them alongside its Ju 88Ds at Trapani, from where III./ZG 1 also operated. It was not long before the new Messerschmitts were committed to reconnoitring the Tunisian coast on what were highly dangerous missions. On 8 February, for example, Unteroffizer Kurt Schulz and Gefreiter Johannes Franks took off in Wk-Nr 0130 F6+YK to cover the coast between Tripoli and Misrata but failed to return. Exactly two weeks later, Feldwebel Walter Spitzmer and Unteroffizier Waldemar Küch attempted a similar mission in Wk-Nr 0210 F6+ZK and are believed to have run into Spitfires from No 145 Sqn and been shot down.

On the morning of 18 April, the *Staffel*'s Leutnant Schiefhauer took off in Wk-Nr 0110 F6+ZK on an armed reconnaissance mission to the Tunisian coast with his radio operator, Oberfeldwebel Wilhelm Giesea. While over the sea at an altitude of 6700 m some 70 km northeast of Bone, their aircraft was attacked from astern by a Spitfire VC of No 43 Sqn flown by Flg Off D C Deuntzer. The Me 210's right engine began to trail white

smoke, shortly after which it turned steeply and dived away. Deuntzer claimed a probable. An RAF Walrus later flew out to where the German aircraft had last been reported, 25 miles north of Cap de Garde. All that remained on the surface was a seat, some other items of wreckage and a box that contained the Me 210's logbook.

The *Staffel* sustained another loss the following day when Me 210 Wk-Nr 100221 F6+ZK, flown by Unteroffizier Erich Förster and Gefreiter Adolf Hahn, was shot down into the sea off Tunisia by Flt Lt A H Thom flying a Spitfire VC of No 87 Sqn. Both men perished.

Down to just one serviceable Me 210 by May 1943, 2.(F)/122 began to relinquish the type in favour of the Me 410 shortly thereafter.

III./ZG 1, meanwhile, continued doggedly with escort missions for Luftwaffe transports during the final days of German military operations in Tunisia, and it was probably on one such operation that Oberleutnant Ferdinand Glanz was wounded while in combat northeast of Catania. Glanz was a former instructor with the *Zerstörerschule* 2 prior to being transferred to ZG 1, where he had taken command of 8. *Staffel* on 15 February.

Even after the Axis surrender on 13 May, the *Gruppe* maintained spasmodic nuisance operations over North Africa. For example, on 21 May, Unteroffizier Joachim Nitschalk and Gefreiter Walter Hofbauer of 8./ZG 1 flew Wk-Nr 2313 2N+LS on a mission to Tunisia, but not far from Cap Bon they were shot down by WO A H Gear of No 72 Sqn who had been scrambled in a Spitfire IX from Souk-el-Khemis to intercept the aircraft.

In June III./ZG 1 relocated from Trapani to nearby Castelvetrano. According to Luftwaffe records, between November 1942 and June 1943 the *Gruppe* had had 21 Me 210s damaged in take-off or landing incidents, during taxiing or as a result of engine problems. A further 21 had been destroyed for the same reasons. A breakdown of these numbers showed that 15 aircraft had been damaged during landing accidents, with seven written off in crashes and eight as a result of engine damage. By comparison, 28 had been destroyed and two damaged in aerial combat, with a further 17 damaged or destroyed in bombing raids.

The deployment of the Me 210 over North Africa and from Sicily achieved little. Summing it up in a post-war assessment of German aerial operations in Italy, the Commanding General of the Luftwaffe in Italy, *General der Flieger* Maximilian *Ritter* von Pohl, commented that 'substitution' of the Ju 88 in the Mediterranean by the Me 210 (and later the Me 410) proved numerically insufficient, and that the Me 210's effectiveness was dogged by short range.

HUNGARIAN Me 210s

When the German military leadership initiated the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, it did so with little regard for the position of its ally, Hungary. Although the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (High Command of the Wehrmacht) directive of 1 May 1941 had been clear in its terms that Hungary would be involved in Operation *Barbarossa*, little was discussed or done on a practical level. The Hungarians were not advised of the impending invasion, although some very general discussions had taken

Z.001, seen in the centre of this group of aircraft, was only the second Me 210Ca-1 built by the Dunai Repülögépgyár RT at Horthyliget, south of Budapest, and the first example to be handed over to the Royal Hungarian Air Force. This photograph was taken on Ferihegy airfield, also south of Budapest, in late 1943 (*Dénes Bernád*)

place in Hungary as to the steps the nation's armed forces should take in the eventuality of war with the Soviet Union. The seriousness of this situation was compounded by the fact that Hungary lacked the industrial capacity to commit to any long-term war or comfortably replace any losses in military materiel.

Despite this, or perhaps even because of it, in early 1941 there had been liaison between Germany and Hungary over the licensed manufacture of German-designed aircraft, culminating in the Hungarian-German Aircraft Cooperation Agreement.

As an example of this, in March of that year, following talks between the Hungarian War Ministry and the RLM, a Hungarian delegation from the Manfréd Weiss aircraft company in Budapest visited the Messerschmitt works at Augsburg and Regensburg with a view to securing manufacturing licences for the Bf 109G and the Me 210. They were successful, and on 26 June 1941, four days after Germany had commenced its invasion of the Soviet Union, the *Honvédelmi Minisztérium* (Hungarian Defence Ministry) placed an order for 210 Me 210s to be built by the Dunai Repülögépgyár RT (Danube Aircraft Factory) at Horthyliget. A condition of the licence was that half of the aircraft built were to be delivered to the Luftwaffe under the designation Me 210Ca, with maximum output projected by September 1943.

German and Hungarian crews would train together on the Me 210Ca-1 in 1944. These two men demonstrate very different clothing, with items of German and Hungarian flight gear. Visible in the distance is another Hungarian Me 210, and a Luftwaffe Fw 190 (*EN Archive*)

In March 1942, Oberst Dipl-Ing Wolfgang Vorwald, Chief of the *Technisches Amt*, returned from a visit to Hungary and reported to Milch how impressed he was by the scale and effort that the Hungarians had committed to production of the Bf 109 and Me 210. He then told him that this would all be in vain if the promised German jigs, tools and associated equipment were not delivered to Hungary in

an expedient fashion. As noted earlier in this volume, deliveries of aircraft built in Germany for the Luftwaffe were already backlogging by this point.

Production of Hungarian Me 210s actually commenced in May 1942, although because of the ongoing lack of tooling, this involved only final assembly of parts transported from Germany. At the *Generalluftzeugmeister* conference of 9 June 1942, Vorwald requested confirmation from the Luftwaffe General Staff as to the position regarding production of the Me 210 in Hungary. It was agreed that this should proceed, since major gaps in output would ensue if production was switched to the Bf 109 or Bf 110.

The Hungarian Me 210s included certain adjustments and changes to the German design. At first, a single Augsburg-built Me 210A-0, Wk-Nr 0105 PN+PD, was refitted with 1475 hp DB 605B engines without MW 1 methanol injection. This machine served as a template for future examples and had a lengthened fuselage and wing leading edge slats. Eventually, DB 601F engines were replaced with DB 605As and the forward-firing armament was reduced to two MG 151/20s. Also, the armour plating installed in German aircraft was removed, leaving only the standard eight-millimetre-thick armour. A number of Hungarian test pilots had familiarised themselves with the type by flying an Me 210A purchased from Germany in 1941, although the Me 210Ca-1's engines lacked the GM-1 nitrous oxide-based power-boosting injection system fitted to this example.

The first license-built machine to be completed was RF+PA in December 1942, which made its inaugural flight on the 28th of that month with Százados (Capt) Dénes Eszenyi at the controls. The first three Ca-1s were duly accepted by the Luftwaffe in April 1943, with German and Hungarian crews training together on the type at Ferihegy, southeast of Budapest. Luftwaffe pilots who flew the Me 210Ca assigned it a higher combat rating than the German version of the aircraft.

The Hungarians took delivery of their first examples (Z.001 and Z.002) in July 1943, and these were used to equip the 5/1. *Kísérleti Éjszakai Vadászázad 'Bagoly'* ('Owl' Nightfighter Squadron) at Ferihegy under the

Me 210Ca-1 Z.066 of the 5/1. *Kísérleti Éjszakai Vadászázad 'Bagoly'* ('Owl' Nightfighter Squadron) suffered a belly-landing at Ferihegy in the summer of 1944. The unit's owl emblem is visible on the nose. The aircraft is painted in a standard Luftwaffe camouflage scheme (*EN Archive*)

command of Százados Ádam Krúdy. As many as 18 standard Me 210Ca-1s were assigned to the unit, although it never managed to attain fully operational status as a nightfighting squadron. Instead, commencing 3 April 1944, aircraft and crews were committed to the daylight defence of Hungary in battles against the bombers of the USAAF's Fifteenth Air Force, which were striking Axis oil targets across southeastern Europe.

Operations on the 3rd proved fruitless, but two days later Örmester (Sgt) Dezsö Zsámboki shot down a B-24 from the 451st BG to claim the 'Owls" first victory. However, on 13 April, as American bombers targeted the Manfred Weiss plant in Budapest and airfields at Ferihegy, Tököl, Vescés and a factory field at Györ, the Me 210s were scrambled again. It was to be a very costly operation as the 5/1. *Éjszakai Vadászázad* lost nine of its aircraft and three of its crews, while virtually all the remaining machines suffered damage. The Me 210s in turn claimed two P-38 escorts and a B-24 shot down, but it was to be the unit's final mission with the aircraft.

Later, nightfighter trials were carried out with the aircraft with provision for a crew of three, the Me 210Cas being fitted with a Hungarian radar system that had a detection range of five to ten kilometres under normal conditions and a maximum of eighteen kilometres. Tests proved successful. Two other aircraft, Z.006 and Z.007, were modified for long-range nightfighting and reconnaissance (as the Me 210Da-1), respectively.

By 1 April 1944, the Dunai Repülögépgyár RT had manufactured 176 Me 210s, but in the aforementioned American raid of the 3rd, 59 aircraft were damaged in the factory buildings and on the works airfield, as well as hangars and workshops belonging to the *Repülö Kísérleti Intézet* (RKI – Aviation Experimental Institute).

As used by the Hungarian Air Defence Force, between 12 and 18 Me 210Ca-1s are known to have been with the RKI *Romboló század* (Destroyer Squadron) at Ferihegy in April 1944 under the command of Alezredes (Lt Col) Loránt Dóczy, but these were crewed mainly by test pilots

An Me 210Ca-1 of the 102/2. *Gyorsbombázó század* (Fast Bomber Squadron) has its engines run up prior to take-off in July 1944. The Germans were generally very impressed with the build quality of the Me 210s produced in Hungary by the Dunai Repülögépgyár RT. Furthermore, serviceability among the Hungarian units remained relatively high (*Dénes Bernád*)

A pair of Me 210Ca-1s of the 102. *Gyorsbombázó osztály* (Fast Bomber Group) during a training flight in 1944. Closest to the camera is Z.074 (*Dénes Bernád*)

with little combat experience along with some highly-trained gunners. Nevertheless, on 12 April, they were deployed against a Fifteenth Air Force raid on Yugoslavia. Although results were inconclusive, one crewman died of wounds following the mission.

The aforementioned American raid of 13 April also saw deployment of the Me 210s of the RKI *Romboló század*, during which it claimed the destruction of four B-24s and two of the P-38 escorts. However, these claims came at a cost, with the unit losing four aircraft to Lightnings, including Z0-54 flown by Alezredes Dóczy. He survived a belly landing and his gunner/radio operator bailed out. The losses on this date were enough to prompt the decision to restrict further operations by Me 210s against US bomber formations.

Elsewhere, the factory defence flight (*Repülö Átvételi Bizottság*) *Készültség* was based at Tököl, south of Budapest, with two Me 210s.

The 1st and 2nd Squadrons of Örnagy (Maj) Albert Martini's 102. *Gyorsbombázó osztály* (Fast Bomber Group) were formed in May-June 1944 and based initially at Zamsoc, then Bilgoraj and, finally, Mielec in Poland. Subsequently, the 102/1. *'Sas'* (Eagle) Squadron went to Klemansovo under the command of Százados Kálmán Háry and in August the 102/2. *'Tigris'* (Tiger) Squadron to Hajdúböszörmény under Százados Pál Bodó. On 21 August, 102 B-17s of the Fifteenth Air Force, along with 46 P-51 escorts, attacked the airfield at Hajdúböszörmény and both squadrons lost several aircraft. After that, and having received replacement Me 210s, the 102. *Gyorsbombázó osztály* rendered support to troops effectively as ground attack aircraft.

During 1944, the Hungarians carried out trials for specialist roles using the Me 210Ca-1. One of these (using Wk-Nr 7003/Z.003), which commenced in March of that year, involved the creation of a heavily-armed *Zerstörer* for deployment against American daylight bomber formations. This saw the installation of a 40 mm Bofors anti-aircraft cannon in the bomb-bay, a pair of MG 151/20s replacing the standard MG 17s and a three-tube 150 mm mortar-launcher fitted under each wing. Following delays, ironically as a result of USAAF air raids, an armament demonstration took place at Várpalota on 24 October 1944 before technicians of the RKI, following which a request was made for a further 30 such conversions, but ultimately only four were completed.

Further projects included an airborne control aircraft with a bench fitted into the bomb-bay on which an additional crewman would lie prone. It is believed to have reached mock-up stage.

By late April 1944, however, the assembly of Me 210 parts from Germany had ceased because the Luftwaffe's emergency fighter programme shifted Messerschmitt's priority to the Bf 109. Some production did continue as stockpiled parts allowed, but the last Me 210Ca-1 was

delivered in September 1944. Figures vary when it comes to the final number of Me 210s constructed in Hungary between 1942-44, quoting between 270 and 302 examples built by the Dunai Repülögépgyár RT near Budapest. Some were destroyed in the factory as a result of Allied bombing. It is believed the Luftwaffe received 100 Me 210Ca-1s, although some German records indicate the figure could have been as low as half of that.

Back in Germany, for much of 1944 the Me 210s equipped with GM-1 power-boosting injection were flown as an early-warning aircraft by the *Luftbeobachtungsstaffeln* (Air Observation *Staffeln*). Fitted with a 300-litre auxiliary fuel tank beneath each wing, these aircraft, flying at high altitudes, tracked USAAF bomber formations and reported on the course and composition of their formations. Boosted by GM-1 performance, the Me 210 was usually able to evade USAAF fighter escorts. Indeed, *Luftbeobachtungsstaffel* 3 is believed to have suffered only one loss, on 11 February 1944.

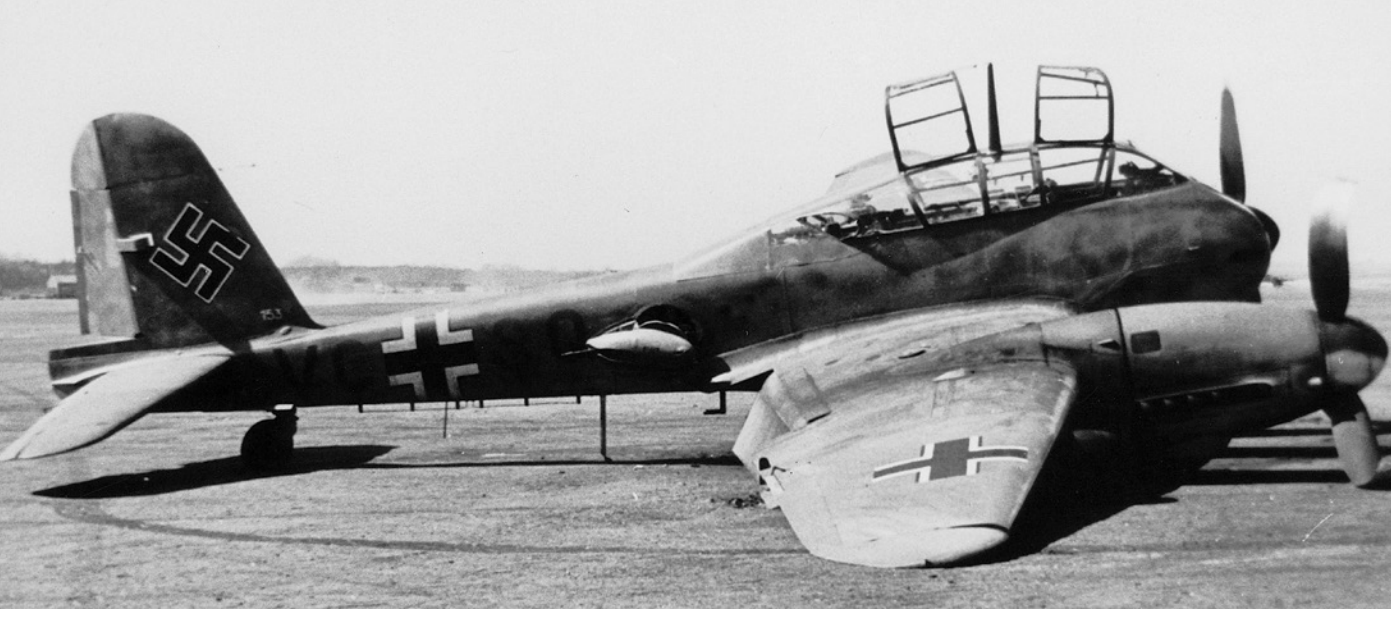
Hungarian-crewed Me 210s operated from September 1944 through to the final battles in Hungary in early 1945. The 102/1. Squadron first went into action on 20 September, dive-bombing railway marshalling yards at Chortkow, in western Ukraine, from 2000 m. Subsequent Luftwaffe reconnaissance revealed the target was almost destroyed. In November the squadron attacked rail targets in southeastern Hungary, but in doing so several of its Me 210s were damaged by enemy fighters and ground fire.

In December 1944, the *Villám* (Lightning) Squadron was formed at the RKI as a third element of the 102. *Gyorsbombázó osztály*. By this time, the group was based at Várpalota.

A typical mission was flown on 16 January 1945, during combined Hungarian and German efforts to liberate Budapest, when Bf 109s from the 101/I Home Air Defence Fighter Wing escorted Me 210s out to destroy a bridge over the Danube at Dunaföldvár. Despite thick fog shrouding the target, it was vital that such missions were flown in an attempt to disrupt Soviet supply lines – and, to all intents and purposes, buy some time. On that occasion, the mission was successful.

Between August 1944 and March 1945, the three squadrons of the 102. *Gyorsbombázó osztály* flew around 800 missions, during which they accounted for approximately 25 Soviet aircraft shot down. By the end of March 1945 the group was at Parndorf, in Austria, where Luftwaffe personnel destroyed the Me 210Ca-1s on the ground to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. There was no fuel available to move them.

A pilot and radio operator from the 102/2. *Gyorsbombázó század* take a break for a snapshot in the autumn of 1944. The hinged canopy of the Me 210 allowed comfortable and roomy access and exit to/from the cockpit (*Dénes Bernád*)



CHAPTER FOUR

EMERGENCE OF THE ME 410

Me 210 Wk-Nr 0110153 VC+SQ suffered an undercarriage collapse during tests at the *Erprobungsstelle* Rechlin on 13 January 1942. The following year it was converted into an Me 410 (*EN Archive*)

After production of the Me 210 had ceased, work continued on improving the basic design. Initially, Messerschmitt planned a high-altitude fighter with fighter-bomber capability, including a pressurised cockpit, which was to be powered by two 1750 hp DB 603A engines driving four-bladed propellers and carrying the same armament as the Me 210A. For its mission type, the wingspan was extended to be around 17.9 m, and the aircraft was to have a maximum speed of 675 km/h at 11,000 m. Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 110179 VN+AQ was modified accordingly and flew between August and September 1943.

The wings fitted to the aircraft were actually intended for a new project known as the Me 310, although VN+AQ's flights were not made as part of this programme but rather to assess flight-handling with longer span and larger wing assemblies and longer leading edge slats for future models. Trials showed that handling in a stall with such a wing gave improvement over the standard Me 210.

Beyond this was the aforementioned Me 310, the development of which is somewhat murky. This design was based on the Me 210E but with a lengthened fuselage, pressurised cockpit and 17.9 m wingspan. Its origins appear to date back to October 1941, when RLM *Technisches Amt* documentation mentioned the planned Me 310 V1 and V2 prototypes with DB 603A engines. Another source suggests that an Me 310A-1 was proposed as a fast-bomber, along with an A-2 variant as a *Zerstörer*.

An aircraft with a history, Me 410 V1 Wk-Nr 027 DI+NW is seen here at Augsburg in early September 1942. It was adapted from Me 210 Wk-Nr 027, being fitted with DB 603A engines as part of its conversion into an Me 410. The aircraft later saw operational service with III./ZG 1 and was damaged during aerial combat over the Netherlands on 10 October 1943. Duly returned to Augsburg for repair, Wk-Nr 027 was used to test contra-rotating engine units in April 1944 prior to being permanently grounded on 13 July (*EN Archive*)

By February 1942, however, the project was still in the sub-assembly stage, but there was little clear planning, and by November, on the instruction of the RLM, all work ceased.

Nevertheless, Messerschmitt continued to improve the Me 210. This resulted in a range of modifications and enhancements that included lengthening the central fuselage section by 950 mm to eradicate oscillations in flight, the aircraft's tendency to ground loop and to overcome its poor spinning characteristics. The air brakes were relocated from the centre of the wing to the outer section in order to stop interference with the airflow over the elevators, and another elevator balance was added. The square supercharger air intakes were also changed to a round design so as to prevent interference with the engine air intakes. Leading edge slats were installed to lower stalling speed and an automatic dive recovery system introduced. Furthermore, defensive armament was increased, as was the amount of armour protection – a vital requirement for envisaged *Zerstörer* operations against heavy bombers and also for prospective ground attack work.

The Me 210 V16 (GI+ST) and V17, which was fitted with an extended fuselage in October 1941, were used to test these modifications, and the results were sufficiently satisfactory for the Messerschmitt *Kobü* to commence work on a new variant of *Kampfzerstörer* that would also be fitted with more powerful engines. In early 1942 the planned Me 210E appeared to offer so much improvement – and promise – that it was decided to reconfigure some 'short' A-1s to V17 specification, with a longer fuselage to compensate for the heavier weight of the intended new DB 603 engine. Further adjustment was needed, however, for such an arrangement, and a constant sweep was introduced across the entire wing's leading edge.

However, the RLM then sanctioned continued production of the Me 210A-1, but incorporating the aforementioned modifications. As a result, approximately 166 'long' Me 210A-1s are believed to have been built between June 1942 and May 1943.

The key element in the revised Me 210 was the DB 603, which Daimler-Benz had presented to the RLM in September 1936. Although the company initially received approval to continue with engine development,

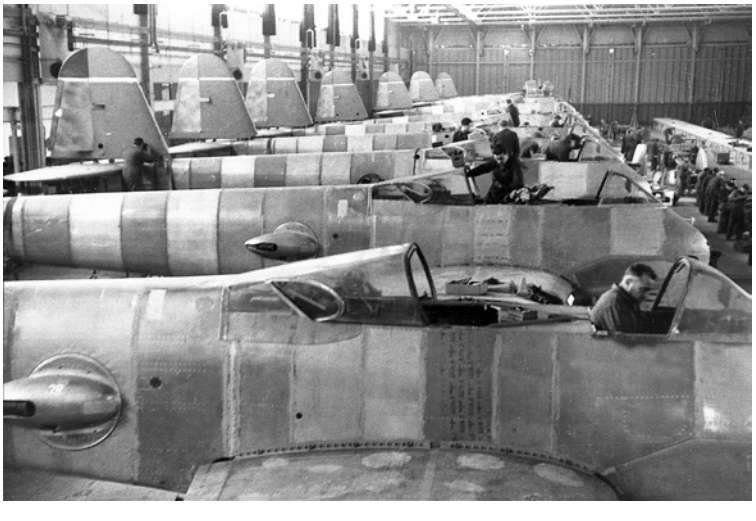
in April 1937 the ministry revoked its decision and Daimler-Benz was forced to fund the work at its own cost, with a prototype having emerged by 1939. The outbreak of war forced the RLM to reconsider, and a contract was placed for the first 120 engines. The DB 603 offered 1375 hp constant at sea level and 1510 hp at an altitude of 5700 m, allowing combat performance for five minutes.

Messerschmitt became interested in the engine as soon as the RLM approved its use in February 1940. DB 603s were to have been fitted in Me 210 Wk-Nr 027 for trials in March 1942, but the first flight was delayed until 26 August of that year. However, it was this trial configuration that would pave the way for the Me 410A-1.

Meanwhile, a meeting at the RLM on 18 August 1942 concurred that with DB 603s fitted, the Me 210 was considerably faster than the Ju 188. On 26 August an Me 210 test-fitted with DB 603s flew at Rechlin, reaching a speed of 525 km/h with good handling characteristics, after which Milch instructed, perhaps hoping to expunge the memory of the Me 210 for good, that it be designated 'Me 410'.

Three weeks later, on 9 September, Oberstleutnant Edgar Petersen, in command of the Luftwaffe's *Erprobungsstellen*, reported to Milch, in what was to be the first official mention of the new designation, that Messerschmitt was in a position to deliver 210 Me 410s fitted with DB 603 engines by 1 December 1942. Regardless of any promises from Messerschmitt, Milch stressed that the Me 410 had to appear in as *simple* a design as possible, and that its primary tactical role would be as a fast bomber for operations over England – something which the Luftwaffe General Staff broadly supported. Production of Do 217s would be cut back to allow for the Me 410. Ultimately, Messerschmitt fell slightly short, and it is believed around 135 Me 410A-1s were converted from Me 210A-1 airframes.

As with the Me 210, these converted machines had their engine gauges installed on the sides of their engine nacelles. However, in the summer of 1943, at the time the first run of a dedicated Me 410A-1 series commenced, the gauges were brought inside the cockpit and fitted on a console in front of the control column.



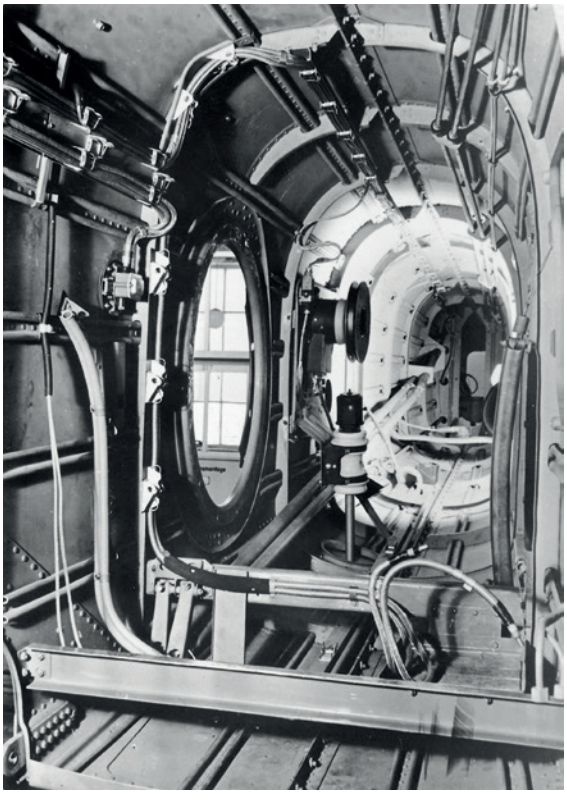
Nine partially assembled Me 410 fuselages on the production line at Augsburg. The rudders have been fitted pre-painted. Note the line of workers on the factory floor to the right preparing individual components for assembly (*EN Archive*)

Eventually, what had been Me 210 Wk-Nr 027 was redesignated as the first Me 410 prototype, DI+NW. It was fitted with DB 603A engines in nacelles that were longer than the Me 210's and it had a lengthened fuselage and new wings. It flew for the first time towards the end of the year.

Work on the first production variant, the Me 410A-1, had already commenced in December 1942, with initial examples being delivered that month. Up to May 1943,

production Me 410s were either converted Me 210 airframes or original Me 210 airframes completed to Me 410 specification. Tracking the production process in batches is difficult because Messerschmitt tended to retain original *Werknummern* and codes, and the selection process of machines for conversion seems to have followed no particular rule. By May 1943 around 135 Me 410A-1s had been finished as conversions, one way or another.

Momentum started to gather. At the regular *Generalluftzeugmeister* meeting of 15 December 1942, Milch was in a bullish mood when he asked that an investigation be carried out as soon as possible to assess whether the Norddeutsche Dornier-Werke, which had been slated to manufacture Ju 188s, could be switched over to the Me 410, provided that fighter and fighter-bomber output could be increased at other plants. On the 22nd, a study presented to the Milch meeting stated that monthly output of the Me 410 should reach 280 by early 1945. As early as mid-January 1943 it was envisaged officially that the new Messerschmitt would be produced at a rate of 300 per month commencing May 1945, but just ten days later this figure had increased to 400 by pruning back production of the Ju 188.



An internal view of the fuselage of Me 210 V2 looking aft, showing the control rods, wiring, framework, formers, longerons and the openings into which the MG 131 machine gun barbettes would be fitted. The basic construction and framework was very similar in the extended Me 410 (*EN Archive*)

The Me 410A-1 was planned and built as a *Schnellkämpfer* or *Schnellbomber* (light, high-speed bomber), primarily for daylight operations over England against specified/briefed targets or for nocturnal strikes against airfields. Able to carry two 500 kg bombs, it was powered by two DB 603A engines housed in lengthened nacelles with air intakes of a different design to the Me 210. The aircraft had a wingspan of 12.48 m (although a span of 12.56 m is mentioned in some sources). A maximum speed, with maximum loaded weight of 11.3 tons, was shown as 485 km/h at sea level and 575 km/h at 6300 m. The A-1 had a theoretical maximum dive speed of 650 km/h at low level. Service ceiling was 8400 m at maximum weight, it had a range of approximately 1350 km at 6400 m and endurance was 2.75 hours.

The A-1 carried the Me 210 armament of four machine guns and two cannon, with the pilot using either a *Reflexvisier* (Revi) C 12/D or *Zielfernrohr* ZFR 4A gunsight to aim them. The Me 210's wing ETC 50s were abandoned quite soon into the production run, however. The aircraft was fitted with a Stuvi 5B dive-bombing sight, FuG 10 and FuG 16 transceivers, FuG 25 IFF radar and *Peilgerät* V and FuBl 1 direction finding equipment.

However, despite Milch's wish that the aircraft be deployed as a bomber against Britain in fast daylight raids on specific, pinpoint targets, as well as nocturnal attacks on enemy bomber airfields, it was not ideally suited for such work. The Me 410 lacked a *Lotfe* gyroscopic reflector bombsight for horizontal bombing and, in reality, was unable to accommodate two

500 kg bombs other than the narrower-bodied SD 500 (*Splitterbomben*) fragmentation bombs. Loading two larger standard-bodied SC 500 (*Minenbomben*) high-explosive weapons for use against buildings would require that the bomb-bay doors be left slightly open, which in turn adversely affected performance. This meant that, in effect, nothing larger than 250 kg ordnance could be carried – internally at least.

From the autumn of 1943, the Me 410A-1 would spawn several sub-variants, or at least modifications, conversions and adaptations. Central among these was the Me 410A-1/U1 reconnaissance aircraft, modified from a standard A-1 by the replacement of the two 7.9 mm MG 17 machine guns (leaving only two MG 151s) with either a vertically-mounted Zeiss Rb (*Reihenbilder*) 20(cm)/30, Rb 50/30 or Rb 75/30 camera fitted into the bomb-bay. The first of these cameras dated back to 1938, and in the case of the Rb 50/30, for example, it incorporated an iris inter-lens shutter and a magazine that contained 64 m of film. The whole unit weighed in at 72 kg.

For some time during 1942 there was concern that the armament of the Me 410 for its role as a *Zerstörer* was too weak. Thus, it was intended that the planned A-2 variant was to be fitted with two Rheinmetall 30 mm MK 103 cannon. This was a gas-operated, air-cooled gun with a rate of fire of around 420 rounds per minute and with the weapon housing, feed and several other key parts stamped out of sheet metal. However, delays in the delivery of the MK 103 forced Messerschmitt to develop another interim sub-variant of the A-1 in the A-1/U2, which would instead be fitted with a WB (*Waffenbehälter*) 151A self-contained, cylindrical gun pod containing a pair of MG 151s with 250 rounds per gun that could be accommodated within the bomb-bay.

The mechanics of the WB gun pod meant that an A-1 bomber could be adapted to *Zerstörer* configuration in under ten hours, supplementing the aircraft's standard set of MG 17s and MG 151s. The cockpit was given an armoured windscreen, and a *Revi* 12 gunsight replaced the existing bombsight, offering a more favourable device for air-to-air combat.

Work on the first ten examples commenced in June 1943, and the following month it was decided that 100 of the 400 Me 410s scheduled for construction that year would be completed as A-1/U2s. This development did nothing to curry favour with Oberst Dietrich Peltz, who would be charged with organising the Luftwaffe's planned bombing campaign against Britain in late 1943, and who remained fundamentally disinterested in the Me 410. He wanted to offload the aeroplane onto the *Jagdwaffe* anyway, but in October 1943 Göring ordered that the Me 410 should continue to be employed as a fast bomber, which, in turn, had a

Rolled out from Augsburg in mid-August 1943, Me 410 V18 Wk-Nr 10115 TF+ED was sent to the Luftwaffe armament test centre at Tarnewitz in the first half of October, where it was fitted with a twin 30 mm MK 103 cannon pack. The aircraft undertook extensive trials with the weapons prior to being returned to Messerschmitt so that its electrics could be tested – the aircraft was recorded as being at the latter location in June 1944 (*EN Archive*)

A view of the main Me 410 assembly line at Augsburg, with airframes at various early stages of construction. The aircraft to the left await fitment of their engine units, while all appear to have had landing gear installed. In the foreground are the component benches (*EN Archive*)

knock-on effect on the numbers of U2s built. It is thought that output of the 'auxiliary *Zerstörer*' never exceeded ten aircraft per month, culminating in a total production of around 100 machines.

One further Me 410A-1 conversion would appear. In the spring of 1943, the RLM grew concerned that a new generation of USAAF B-29 strategic daylight bombers would be able to fly over the Reich at altitudes above 10,000 m. One proposal to counter such a threat was to remove the radio operator and rearward-firing barbettes from the Me 410A-1 to create a lighter, single-seat version. The 380 kg weight-saving would then allow the fitment of a GM-1 power-boosting system. The intended armament was envisaged as two MG 151s and two of the anticipated MK 103s, which, it was hoped, would be available by the autumn of 1943. Messerschmitt also planned to add wingtip extensions to permit greater altitude for interception of the bombers.

By early 1944 a small number of single-seat *Zerstörer* had reached II./ZG 26, led by Hauptmann Eduard Tratt, at Hildesheim. These machines lacked both the barbettes for the MG 131 guns and a radio mast. However, trials proved that while an increase in speed of around 20 km/h was possible, there was little true tactical gain, and it seems that, ultimately, no GM-1 installation went ahead. In March 1944 the *Gruppe* converted to the Me 410A-1/U4 with five-centimetre cannon.

By 14 September 1943 one Me 410 was undergoing conversion into a single-seat *Zerstörer*, but by this stage the weight-saving – in true Messerschmitt style – had increased to 1800 kg, which more than adequately allowed the installation of a 500 kg GM-1 system. This would permit the aircraft to patrol for an hour at heights of 10,500-11,000 m.

The reality was that on 26 February 1943, the Messerschmitt 'history' of poor delivery promises and unreliable components returned to haunt the Me 410 project. The company informed Milch's department that a two-month delay could be expected while a new, larger water radiator was fitted to aircraft then under construction. Messerschmitt assured the RLM

An instructor watches as an NCO armourer works on the left-side MG 131. Note the ammunition belt. The dinghy access panel has been removed, and it appears that the groundcrewman on the wing is either re-fitting or removing the cockpit seating (*EN Archive*)

that the new radiator would result in an increase in speed since the flaps had had to be extended back to clear the older, smaller unit. However, testing had also revealed that the louvres were susceptible to cracking along their leading edges.

Milch was also irritated by Messerschmitt's admission that anticipated production figures would fall short by 67 aircraft in 1943 because of an apparent lack of labour. Despite the latter, production did increase progressively, with 25 aircraft delivered by mid-April out of a projected 30 (still an overall deficit of 40), 42 aircraft by mid-May and 40 aircraft by 1 June. On 18 June, the *Generalluftzeugmeister*'s office stated that it had no concerns with production at that point. It seemed that a corner had been turned.

Milch announced at his regular meeting on 18 June that the Me 410 was in full-scale production, and that it would play a key role in the forthcoming campaign against Britain by striking enemy bomber bases as bombers returned from missions over occupied Europe. Other options included using the aircraft for U-boat cover in the Mediterranean and the Bay of Biscay, as well as in deployment as a torpedo-bomber.

In December 1942 the Luftwaffe had begun to receive its first Me 410s. 11./ZG 1, the existence of which spanned only three months after it was formed from 16./KG 6 (itself formed from *Erprobungskommando* 210), was redesignated *Erprobungsstaffel* 410. Like *Erprobungsstaffel* 210, this unit was intended to service test the Me 410 in readiness for its handover to frontline Luftwaffe units. On 11 May 1943 the *Staffel* was redesignated 9./KG 101, and as of 6 June it became a testing and evaluation unit for high-speed air combat, being based at Lechfeld.

The development of the Me 410 during the spring of 1943 coincided with Hitler's desire to spread carnage from the air across Britain. In the wake of faltering campaigns in the Soviet Union and North Africa, the *Führer* wanted to inflict high-profile, media-grabbing psychological damage on the British population to demonstrate to the world that Nazi Germany was still a force to be reckoned with. To this end, and in an indication of just how seriously Hitler's objectives were being taken, in March 1943 the seemingly impressive title of *'Angriffsführer England'* (Attack Commander England) was created. Its one and only appointee was to be 29-year-old Dietrich Peltz.

After an impressive operational record in the Luftwaffe, in which he had served over Poland, France, the British Isles and the Soviet Union, Peltz had been awarded the Swords to the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves on 23 July 1943, having undertaken around 320 missions as a Stuka and bomber pilot. In March 1941 he had been appointed to command II./KG 77 and by 12 July that year he had flown his 200th combat mission.

In January 1942 Peltz took command of the *Verbandsführerschule für Kampfflieger* (Bomber Unit Leaders' School) at Foggia, in Italy, which later moved to Tours, in France. This school was redesignated I./KG 60 in August 1942 as an anti-shipping unit, with the then Major Peltz as its *Kommandeur*. Promoted to Oberstleutnant on 1 December 1942, he was ordered away from operations and appointed *General der Kampfflieger* (Commanding General of the Bomber Force). In March 1943 Peltz was simultaneously given the title *Angriffsführer England*, with specific responsibility for assembling a bomber force and effecting a bombing campaign against the British Isles. In August of that same year, as he was preparing to pull together whatever resources he could, Peltz was simultaneously appointed commander of IX. *Fliegerkorps* and promoted to Oberst.

It was for the task of striking at Britain that Milch believed the Me 410 could be pressed upon Peltz. Indeed, he said it unequivocally at a conference on 18 March 1943 at around the time of Peltz's appointment;

'The only possible aircraft with which the new *Angriffsführer* can work is, in addition to the Fw 190 fighter-bomber, the Me 410. This type is the *very* aircraft with which he can conduct effective operations. It is the only aircraft with the speed performance of a fighter, and which is fully suitable for daylight attacks. In this connection, it still needs to be ascertained to what extent this aircraft is suitable for night operations. The high flying speeds of the *Viermots* ('four-motors' – Allied four-engined bombers) can only be achieved by putting up with high landing speeds.

'There is one aspect about the Me 410 which does concern me. Adherence to the targeted delivery dates does not seem to be ensured. It will take too long until the aircraft can be put into series production. I want to stress again that this aircraft is no new build, but a conversion of the Me 210.'

For his part, Oberst Peltz wanted to replace the lesser-range Me 410A-1 with the new Ju 88S, but insufficient production of the latter type meant the Messerschmitt would have to be deployed in order to satisfy Hitler's directive that attacks on the British Isles be carried out with 'all' available aircraft types. This, despite the fact that Peltz was quite prepared to hand over the Me 410 to the *Jagdwaffe* as a bomber-destroyer. He spoke frankly with Milch;

'I would much rather do without the Me 410. However, it will be of decisive importance that somebody raises the demand for additional fast bomber aircraft, and since the Ju 88 is not available for this purpose, the Me 410 is needed. Thus, this aircraft is urged on me again and again. If it is to be ordered that the Me 410 is to be employed by default over another aircraft, I cannot do anything about it. The performance of this aircraft is comparatively adequate. But the difficulties encountered during employment! Crash-landings! By now we have lost 80 aircraft. Of this number, 30 were lost in training, 30 during take-off, landing or transfer etc., and the rest in combat operations. Enemy losses as a result have been relatively slight. What great expenditure is dissipated just to carry a 500 kg bomb to a target!'

Milch endeavoured to assuage Peltz of his concerns;

'But today you have to take what you can get. You must realise how often such an aircraft can fly its mission and what a number of bombs a

crew carries to the target. Perhaps the Me 410 is not so good because of its other characteristics. Its performance as a twin-engine aircraft is fantastic.'

At the end of April Milch was at Göring's quarters on the Obersalzberg. He informed the *Reichsmarschall* that 25 Me 410 airframes had been produced that month and that 430 could be expected by the end of the year. However, in light of the demand for a successful bombing campaign against Britain, the *Generalluftzeugmeister* had to admit that the bomb-bay could load only one SD 1000 bomb, and that the more general purpose SC 1000 bomb would have to be modified to fully fit into the bay. Despite that, Milch was confident that the Me 410's speed, firepower and armour protection were suitable for offensive daylight operations over Britain.

One man who *was* intrigued by, and perhaps more attracted to, the Me 410 than Peltz was Generalmajor Adolf Galland, the *General der Jagdflieger*, whose single-engined fighter forces were involved in an intensive daylight air war of attrition in the defence of the homeland against the USAAF's mighty fleet of heavy bombers. In the summer of 1943, Galland wanted to mount a mass *'Blitz'* attack against a major American raid by bringing to bear 100 to 120 Bf 110s and Me 410s collected in three *Zerstörergruppen* and a single bomber *Gruppe* converted to the *Zerstörer* role. The attack would be made in one prolonged assault using the *Zerstörer* fitted with heavy calibre cannon and air-to-air mortars. In June 1943 Milch confessed to Galland that the Me 410 had shortcomings in the area where performance was needed most – altitude. As he commented to the fighter commander;

'You know that the Me 410 has never been my favourite, but what I found was something that we could not give up [i.e. the Me 210]. We experienced the same with the He 177 in another sector. A considerable manufacturing capacity was established with ample material preparations. What can we do? If it had been a time of peace, we would have said, "Let's stop it! Let's get something new!"

'That would have involved an immense, concealed reduction of the armament potential which would have been bearable in peacetime, but not in war. For this reason I said, "We have to make something of the Me 210 at whatever cost. Thus the Me 410 was developed as a result of a great number of changes. Of course, it cannot be an ideal aircraft in this form. However, we have to make use of it now. It also has, of course, attractive qualities under specific circumstances. The gravest aspect for us – and we must recognise this – is its poor performance at altitude. Its speed would be sufficient for combat operations against bombers. Its armament could be made adequate.

A classic view of the Me 410, which illustrates scale as technicians work on the instruments and engines of RN+ZA in October 1943. Two MG 151/20 cannon have been installed into the aircraft's bomb-bay to create an A-1/U2 sub-type. Shortly after this photograph was taken, however, the Me 410 was lost on 15 November 1943 while in service with 6./ZG 26 (*EN Archive*)

'Today, the pilots do not encounter any great difficulties when flying daylight missions. You can operate and fight with this aircraft in daylight. Its cruising range can be considered adequate for this purpose. Thus, only one certain quality is missing at the moment – the most important at this moment, of course. When we fear that the enemy will climb, we want to climb too. This is the most important factor, but this aircraft cannot reach the altitude desired.'

On 3 August Milch told attendees at his weekly conference that Peltz considered the Ju 188 to be more suited to the bomber role than the Me 410, and that he would willingly forget the Messerschmitt in order to get the Junkers. He was supported in this view by leading Luftwaffe bomber ace Oberst Werner Baumbach, assigned to the RLM as *Inspizient der Kampfflieger* (Inspector of Bombers), who opined that the Ju 188 was a better aircraft than the Me 410 because of its speed, while Oberstleutnant Viktor von Lossberg, another experienced bomber pilot attached to the RLM's *Technisches Amt* to investigate nightfighting methods, felt the same way. Indeed, Lossberg stated that operating the Me 410 as a nightfighter would be 'disastrous'.

On 24 September Göring announced at a conference, 'Regarding the question whether the altitude performance of the Me 410 can be improved, I think the 410 is built just for speed to such an extent that its altitude performance cannot be changed. If the aircraft could be re-engineered, it would be a new aircraft with a new fuselage and new landing gear. In brief, everything would then be new. In such a case, the engines would no longer be strong enough to give the same performance. In brief, we'd be going around in circles again'.

On 14 October Göring ordered that in addition to an increase in the production of Ju 88s, output of the Me 410 be increased to 600 aircraft per month, rising to 900 per month, despite questions hanging over its effectiveness.

On 26 November Göring invited Hitler to Insterburg, in East Prussia, which was located conveniently near to the *Führer*'s eastern headquarters at Rastenburg. In an attempt to restore his declining prestige, the *Reichsmarschall* had set up a display of some of the Luftwaffe's latest aircraft and weaponry, including prototypes of the advanced Messerschmitt and Arado jet- and rocket-powered interceptors. Hitler seemed generally indifferent to the flying display and was more keen to know what immediate steps were being taken to retaliate against Allied bombing raids on the Reich. The following day, Göring promised Hitler that he would arrange for the Luftwaffe to carry out a major retaliatory bombing raid on London.

However, for much of late 1943, senior Allied commanders did not believe they had anything to fear from a conventional Luftwaffe bomber campaign against the British Isles, although the threat was not ruled out. As the former RAF Fighter Command staff officer and military historian Basil Collier has commented;

'There was little disposition to over-estimate the threat from orthodox bombers, for the German bomber force had been unimpressive in recent months, and the training of crews for accurate bombing of well-defended targets was justly thought to have been so long neglected that a spectacular recovery was improbable.'

However, reports began to filter through that a young, but senior-ranking German air commander was gathering a new force whose goal was to bomb London, which would be seen as the centre of command for any Allied invasion of occupied France. Places where troops, ships and aircraft could be expected to assemble during the spring would also be targeted. Even these reports caused little alarm among the staffs of RAF Fighter Command and the Air Defence of Great Britain.

On 28 November Göring chaired a hastily convened conference of senior officers at Neuenhagen, on the eastern outskirts of Berlin. Among those in attendance was the now Generalmajor Peltz, who had been summoned from the headquarters of IX. *Fliegerkorps* in France. Göring trusted Peltz.

The *Reichsmarschall* impressed upon the assembled gathering of senior officers the need for secrecy in respect of what he was about to say, and what he did say caught most of the attendees by surprise. Göring informed them that he wanted a new series of bombing raids planned against Great Britain, with London as the main target. There was some urgency about this, as Göring explained;

'I have told the *Führer* that we shall be ready in 14 days. It is absolutely necessary that we should have 300 aircraft ready for the first operation. If I can have about 100 in the second attack and, early in the morning, about 150, that will come to between 550 and 600 sorties – that is what we must aim at.'

The *Führer* had also agreed to wait a further ten days, should a full moon help to improve the chances of success.

The following month, Göring formalised his intentions in an order dated 3 December 1943 addressed to Milch, Peltz and the commanders of the *Luftflotten* based in Italy and France;

'To avenge the terror attacks by the enemy I have decided to intensify the air war over the British Isles, by means of concentrated attacks on cities and especially industrial centres and ports.'

Göring planned to strip the bomber units based in the Mediterranean in order to bolster the bomber force in France. Ultimately, this force would number *Gruppen* drawn from nine *Geschwader*, totalling more than 500 aircraft comprised mainly of Ju 88s augmented by Do 217s, Ju 188s, Me 410s, He 177s and Fw 190s. Göring demanded that the re-equipment and replenishment of the units assigned to take part in the operations, as well as their ground support infrastructure, move ahead as quickly as possible, and that forward airfields be made fully ready. Tactical direction of the campaign was to be placed under Peltz's IX. *Fliegerkorps* based at Le Coudray-sur-Thelle, near Beauvais, and planning conducted under the strictest secrecy.

While Göring wanted aircraft such as the He 177 to spearhead the campaign, dropping heavy tonnage high-explosive ordnance in blanket bombing raids, Peltz favoured mounting low-level nocturnal strikes against British power stations using smaller, faster aircraft, or to make such attacks in periods of bad weather. He felt that this was the best to way ensure his relatively small force had the maximum impact on the enemy's economy.

So far, the total cost of the Me 410 development programme amounted to more than 60 million Reichsmarks, the equivalent of the production of 600 aircraft of other types. Yet it remained to be seen just how the aircraft would perform in combat – and its time was coming.

Aside from some heavy exhaust staining, otherwise pristine Me 410 Wk-Nr 420025 of III./ZG 1 stands parked in its brick and concrete revetment at a Mediterranean airfield, possibly Trapani. Despite flying intensive bombing, armed reconnaissance and escort sorties, the presence of the *Gruppe*'s *Zerstörer* in the Mediterranean theatre in only modest numbers meant that the unit's efforts were little more than a nuisance to the Allies (*EN Archive*)

CHAPTER FIVE

'THE DEVIL'S OWN LUCK'

In the Mediterranean, by June 1943 the writing was on the wall. One Allied pilot summed up the Axis situation when he reported the previous month that 'We have nothing to bomb. There are no enemy aircraft in the sky. There is practically nothing we can see to hit, nothing to strafe'. That was because the last Axis aircraft had flown out of Sicily to the Italian mainland on 9 May.

Yet even with the Allies dominant in the skies over North Africa and Sicily, the Luftwaffe continued to fight back. The Me 210s and new Me 410s of III./ZG 1 based in the Naples area under Hauptmann Wilhelm Berlin undertook, albeit sporadically, armed reconnaissance sorties and bombing attacks against Allied shipping and enemy-occupied coastal areas. These missions duly brought attrition – on 24 June Me 210 Wk-Nr 0063 DN+JT, flown by Unteroffizier Werner Günther and Gefreiter Hugo Ludwig of 9. *Staffel* was shot down over an Allied convoy, possibly by a P-39 of the USAAF's 93rd FS/81st FG.

However, it would not be long before III./ZG 1 departed the theatre, the *Gruppe* returning to Germany at the end of July. Once home, it would be redesignated II./ZG 26 and take on the Me 410 for *Reichsverteidigung* (Defence of the Reich) operations.

One unit that continued to operate in the Mediterranean was 2.(F)/122, its few remaining Me 210s having been pulled out of Trapani and relocated to Frosinone. Here, the *Staffel* also commenced taking on the Me 410,

allowing it to continue undertaking reconnaissance missions over the Tyrrhenian Sea and as far south as Malta. As a reconnaissance aircraft, the Me 210 was faster than most other types used for such work. Nevertheless, during its initial deployment in 1942 the aircraft still needed a fighter escort. By the following year, however, it was not always possible to provide Bf 109s or Fw 190s to protect reconnaissance aircraft, so the Me 210s and Me 410s sortied alone – a dangerous task, given increasing Allied air superiority.

On the same day that Günther and Ludwig of III./ZG 1 had been lost, Me 410A-1/U3 Wk-Nr 0157 F6+XK, crewed by pilot Oberleutnant Ulrich Nauck and radio operator Unteroffizier Willi Weber, of 2.(F)/122 was listed as being shot down 20 km south of Cap Passero by Sgt F Mellor flying a Spitfire IX of No 111 Sqn. Neither crewman survived.

On 29 July, the crew of Leutnant Martin Schweitz and Unteroffizier Franz Brandstötter were posted missing when Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 110161 F6+UK failed to return from a reconnaissance mission of the harbours in western Sicily. Exactly a month later, on the afternoon of 29 August, the *Staffel* lost another of its precious Me 410s when Wk-Nr 0014 F6+UK flown by Oberfeldwebel Alexander Kaschub, with Unteroffizier Werner Kirchhoff as radio operator, crashed into the sea east of Corsica. It is believed they had encountered a Baltimore of No 52 Sqn, and in the ensuing combat were shot down by defensive fire. Kaschub survived as a PoW but Kirchhoff was killed.

By November 1943 the Me 410s of 2.(F)/122 (now led by Hauptmann Matthias Weinand, who had replaced Hauptmann Dirk Lütjens that same month) were carrying out reconnaissance of coastal areas, on the lookout for further potential Allied landing sites and activity along the western coast of Italy. In the process the unit suffered further losses during daylight coverage of ports and shipping. The Messerschmitts, which tended to fly on a straight course to their targets at an altitude of 7500-8500 m, were routinely engaged by Allied fighters over Italy during the flight out or back.

A relatively unusual and dramatic episode involving one of 2.(F)/122's aircraft occurred on 22 November as Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 10259 F6+OK, flown by Oberleutnant Stubbe, returned from a photographic reconnaissance over the Mediterranean. Instead of crossing the Italian coast north of Rome, Stubbe made a major navigational error and approached the large Monte Corvino airfield east of Salerno. According to an Allied intelligence report;

'A normal circuit, with undercarriage lowered, was made of the airfield, during which time neither of the crew noticed that a large number of aircraft on the field were Allied types. As the pilot made his approach to

A mechanic, clasping his cap against the wash from the still-spinning propeller blades, runs out to chock the wheels of an Me 410A-3 from 2.(F)/122 as it returns from a reconnaissance mission over the Mediterranean. The presence of a 'welcoming committee' and the smiling pilot in the cockpit suggests the completion of a milestone sortie. Note the faired-over gun ports and the camera windows in the lower nose (*EN Archive*)

land, anti-aircraft fire was opened by the ground defences, in response to which recognition signals were fired from the aircraft. The anti-aircraft fire thereupon ceased and the aircraft made a normal landing. The crew immediately discovered their mistake, and at the end of the landing run the pilot swung the aircraft round and the engines were revved up, with the intention of taking off at once.

'At this point, two RAF officers intervened by driving a 15-cwt. lorry across the path of the aircraft. The pilot endeavoured to swing clear, but was prevented from doing so by prompt manoeuvring of the lorry. One of the officers jumped down and threatened the crew with an automatic, whereupon the German radio operator jumped clear of the aircraft. The pilot, however, made another attempt to get away, and the RAF officer immediately jumped into the wireless operator's vacant seat and ordered the pilot to switch off his engines, which he only did after the automatic had been pressed against his neck. The crew were taken prisoner and the aircraft put under immediate guard. Owing to the prompt action taken by these two officers, the aircraft was recovered absolutely intact.'

Indeed, this Me 410 was eventually shipped to Britain in 1944, where it was flight-tested by the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) at Farnborough, then by the Fighter Interception Unit at Wittering and, finally, by the Central Fighter Establishment (CFE) at Tangmere, after which it was sold for scrap in August 1947.

On the afternoon of 26 November, Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 10253 F6+QK of 2.(F)/122 was shot down while on a reconnaissance mission between Foggia and Termoli. Flg Off J C Minto of No 145 Sqn, flying a Spitfire VIII, lodged a claim, and after crash-landing on the banks of the Sangro River, the Messerschmitt became the subject of investigation by Allied technical intelligence. Its crew of Oberfeldwebel Artur Kammberger and Unteroffizier Vitus Mirlach were captured.

Both men had already had a lucky escape when flying Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 0031 F6+PK on 24 September 1943. On that occasion they had encountered Spitfires near Avellino, to the east of Naples, and had fallen victim to a shared claim between Wg Cdr Hugh Dundas, leading No 324 Wing, and Flt Sgt J W Larlee of No 72 Sqn – the RAF pilots had misidentified their victim as a Ju 88. Both Kammberger and Mirlach were wounded, although they subsequently returned to duties.

As 1943 gave way to 1944, the role of 2.(F)/122 was described by the Chief of Staff of *Luftflotte* 2 as being 'reconnaissance over the central Mediterranean, primarily with the objective of being able to detect at an early stage any by-passing landing operations'. By this stage, the *Staffel* was based at

Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 10253 F6+QK of 2.(F)/122 fell victim to Flg Off J C Minto of No 145 Sqn, flying a Spitfire VIII, while on a reconnaissance mission on 26 November 1943 and crash-landed into the banks of the Sangro river. Note how the right outboard wing has shorn away on impact with the ground. The Messerschmitt became the subject of investigation by Allied technical intelligence, its crew of Oberfeldwebel Artur Kammberger and Unteroffizier Vitus Mirlach having been captured (*EN Archive*)

Perugia, where the Me 410s were parked in the open in dispersal areas some 275 m from the runway, connected by gravel taxi-tracks. Slit trenches were dug around the airfield, but when warning came of a raid it was usual for personnel to vacate the base entirely, leaving the aircraft to their fate. Flying personnel were quartered in a school building in Assisi, while ground personnel were at Bastia and the photographic unit based nearby in the small village of Bastiola.

Since June 1943, 2.(F)/122 had lost around ten Me 410s, and its first casualty in the new year was Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 0235 F6+PK. On 8 January the aircraft, flown by Fahnenjunker-Feldwebel Helmut Atzler and with Unteroffizier Willi Ehrhardt as radio operator, had taken off at 1010 hrs from Perugia on a photographic reconnaissance of shipping in the Adriatic and along the eastern coast of Sicily. The crew had orders to immediately report by radio any supply ships spotted approaching the coast.

Just 20 minutes into the flight, and while flying at about 8500 m, the Me 410 was attacked by Flg Off R W Henderson in a No 92 Sqn Spitfire VIII that approached from out of the sun. Both of the Messerschmitt's engines were knocked out and the pilot endeavoured to make a landing in the wooded mountainous region near Castiglione/Marsa Marino. However, the Me 410 hit the tops of trees and Atzler was killed in the subsequent crash. Ehrhardt managed to extricate himself from the wreckage and surrendered to British troops.

By 31 May the only Me 410A-1s remaining in Italy were the seven examples assigned to 2.(F)/122, of which just three were serviceable. New aircraft trickled in very slowly – one was delivered from Munich on 4 June – and the *Staffel* maintained operations throughout the summer of 1944, reaching its '3000th mission' (although this figure was based on all types of aircraft), flying from Perugia, Bergamo, Piacenza and Ghedi. Typically, reconnaissance sorties would have a duration of around two hours.

During the early hours of 19 June, Oberleutnant Herbert von der Daele and Unteroffizier Blaschek took off from Piacenza to undertake a reconnaissance mission over the island of Elba, which had just fallen to the Allies. Flying in to cover the west of the island at low-level, they

The unusual camouflage scheme and overall appearance of Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 170040 F6+NK of 2.(F)/122 in Italy suggests that it has been the subject of re-painting. The aircraft crashed into Lake Bolsena, in central Italy, and was destroyed on 18 April 1944 while being flown by Oberleutnant Heinz Nau and Obergefreiter Hugo Potthoft in circumstances that are not clear. Both crew were killed (*EN Archive*)

spotted a pair of P-47s dropping down towards them from behind, and Blaschek opened fire at the USAAF fighters from 900 m with his left barbette. As von der Daele flew over the island, the Me 410 attracted anti-aircraft fire, while the P-47s continued in pursuit across the Italian coastline at Follonica. The USAAF fighters continued to chase their quarry as far as Arezzo, by which time one of them had suffered an electrical failure, preventing the pilot from firing his guns, and the other had ran out of ammunition. Von der Daele and Blaschek managed to land safely at Bergamo, albeit with their aircraft badly shot up.

By July 2.(F)/122's Me 410A-1s had been augmented by at least one of the new B-3s, the reconnaissance version of the new DB 603A-powered Me 410B series. The B-3 as it first appeared was fitted with a complex camera pod in the bomb-bay, but in the B-3/U1 the arrangement was simplified, with the camera set being more elementary in design and located in the aft fuselage along with a GM-1 system installed in the bomb-bay, like the earlier A-3/U1. Along with a solitary Ju 88D-1 and a Fi 156 Storch, 2.(F)/122 reported three Me 410s on strength in July 1944.

The following month the *Staffel* mounted around 85 sorties and moved into Ghedi after Bergamo had been subjected to air attack. The former had the tactical advantage of being further south, thus allowing a greater range of operations for the Messerschmitts. Even as the unit transferred, one of its Me 410s carried out a reconnaissance mission along the way.

No sooner had 2.(F)/122 arrived at Ghedi, however, than its Me 410s were required for reconnaissance over the Tyrrhenian Sea. On 10 August at least two Me 410s were despatched, but one, F6+IK, flown by Leutnant Dietrich Stämmler, a graduate of *Blindflugschule* 3, was attacked by Spitfire VIIIs of No 241 Sqn at an altitude of just 150 m above the water. Stämmler's radio operator, Unteroffizier Arthur Karsch, returned fire using his left barbette gun, but a Spitfire closed in to 140 m and continued firing. After being raked across its engines, wings and fuselage, the Messerschmitt climbed slightly before diving steeply down and crashing into the sea. The wreckage was seen burning on the surface.

It was more of the same three days later when 2.(F)/122 sent out two Me 410s from Ghedi to cover the sea north of Corsica and the area between La Spezia and the French coast. Fahnrich Richard Hesse and his radio operator, Unteroffizier Helmut Seegert, in F6+GK were assigned to the former task, and they were bounced by a pair of Spitfires as they crossed the coast at 10,000 m near La Spezia. Hesse attempted to evade one, but in doing so attracted fire from the other. With his left engine ablaze, he ordered Seegert to bail out, which he did. Although Hesse survived to be picked up from the water by the Allies, Seegert was never found.

As August gave way to September, the *Staffel* managed to retain five aircraft on strength and usually had around six available crews at any one time. Standard operating procedure involved keeping the Me 410s in a semi-circle of concrete blast pens and moving them out daily. Typically, they would take off in pairs each day between 0600-0700 hrs and 1600-1700 hrs, although during October inclement weather conditions began to hamper flights over both the Ligurian and Adriatic Seas. By the beginning of November, aircraft strength at Ghedi had increased slightly to eight Me 410s, six of which were serviceable.

On the night of 17-18 November, the Allied air forces launched concerted bombing raids on Axis airfields in northern Italy, and Ghedi did not escape, with several aircraft damaged. Despite this, Oberleutnant von der Daele and Unteroffizier Blaschek were airborne in F6+AK during the afternoon of the 18th on a reconnaissance mission over the Ligurian Sea.

Operations continued more sporadically in December as a result of the poor weather, Allied air superiority, dwindling fuel stocks and serviceability. At the end of the year 2.(F)/122 reported just two Me 410s on strength, although some new aircraft did arrive within a few days. Oberleutnant von der Daele and Unteroffizier Blaschek flew five of the unit's seven sorties in January, all from Bergamo. It was a rare occasion – such as on 21 January – that the *Staffel* managed to get two aircraft in the air at once. Upon the completion of their mission on this date, von der Daele and Blaschek had to land at Bergamo with P-38s flying over the airfield.

At 1037 hrs on 23 February Leutnant Franz Girlich, another former pupil of *Blindflugschule* 3, and Unteroffizier Walter Kemna took off from Bergamo for a routine reconnaissance flight. It was their second attempt of the day, the first having been aborted in fog as a result of technical problems. South of Parma they encountered P-47s from the 350th FG, which were returning to base after dive-bombing rail targets at Ora.

2Lt Jim Young went after the Me 410, using his fighter's water injection to keep pace. As he did so, the Messerschmitt climbed sharply from low-level to around 300 m, but then dived back down. For several minutes the P-47 chased the Me 410 at tree top-level, Young firing short bursts at the German aircraft as its left engine trailed smoke. Eventually, Young scored hits on the right engine, the Messerschmitt's right wing dipped and it hit the ground in a ball of flame.

With the odds so heavily stacked against them, and the war in Italy drawing to a close, 2.(F)/122's four remaining Me 410B-3s left the country in early April 1945, having provided essential but insufficient photographic intelligence on Allied shipping in the Mediterranean for the Axis high commands.

INTRUDERS AGAINST ENGLAND

Shortly after taking command of IX. *Fliegerkorps* in the late summer of 1943, Dietrich Peltz oversaw bombing and harassment operations against Britain in line with Göring's intentions. The first phase, which had commenced in June, comprised long-range intruding, nuisance attacks and nightfighting against RAF bombers returning from raids over Europe.

To spearhead these attacks, in early June 1943 a new V. *Gruppe* of KG 2 was formed at Lechfeld under Hauptmann Friedrich-Wilhelm Methner (the former *Kommandeur* of II./KG 40) from 4. and 5./KG 40 and 5./KG 2 to create a 14., 15. and 16./KG 2, respectively, while a 13. *Staffel* was established from scratch. The new *Gruppe* was to be equipped with the Me 410, although 5./KG 2 had by then already started to familiarise itself with 12 examples of the new *Zerstörer* as a *'Schnellkampfstaffel'* (high-speed combat squadron).

After a hurried training period, V./KG 2 departed Lechfeld in mid-June for Merville, in northern France. Then, after transferring temporarily to

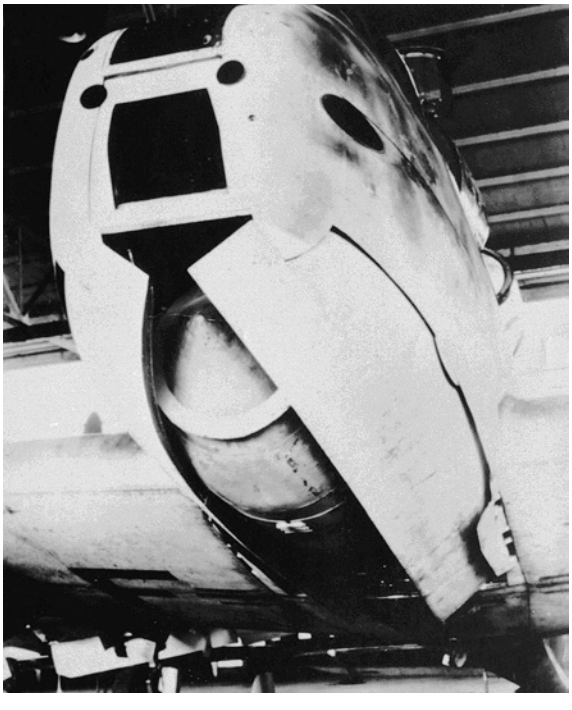
Evreux, which was better located for attacking targets along the south coast of England, the *Gruppe* carried out its first mission on the night of 17-18 June when 11 Me 410s struck the harbour at Portsmouth in a shallow attack from 5000 m. The weather conditions were on the side of the bombers, and they were able to drop 22 SC 250 bombs in the southern part of the town, observing fires breaking out in an industrial area. The Messerschmitts returned to Evreux without loss.

A second *Störangriff* (nuisance raid) was mounted on the night of 21-22 June when the *Gruppe* despatched 12 Me 410s to attack Southampton, although one aircraft was forced to turn back over the English Channel on account of engine problems while a second had to release its bombs on the secondary target of Chichester due to technical problems. The remaining Me 410s reached Southampton at 0300 hrs, and from a height of 3500 m dropped a total of 18 SC 250s and a single PC 1000 high-explosive armour-piercing bomb on the southern districts of the port city.

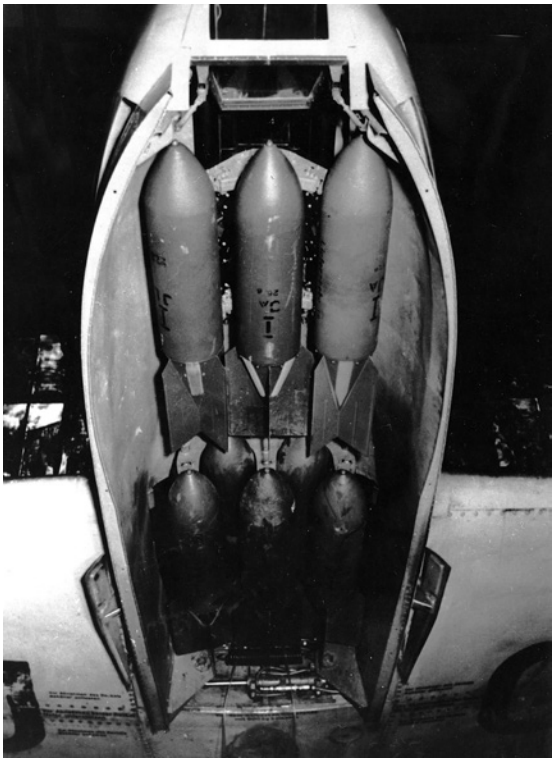
Oberst Dietrich Peltz, the *'Angriffsführer England'*, was a very experienced bomber pilot and highly decorated officer. Somewhat radical in his tactical beliefs, he was sceptical about the benefits of deploying the Me 410 in bombing attacks against Britain and preferred the Ju 188. He recommended that the Messerschmitt be given to the *Jagdwaffe* (*EN Archive*)

The following night the Me 410s were back in action, in cloudy skies, but this time over the British capital. All 12 aircraft sent out reached London, attacking in two waves of four and six machines, using dead reckoning navigation. They dropped their SC 250 bombs from between 3500 m and 6000 m and returned safely. The next day, the *Gruppe* returned to Merville.

V./KG 2 did not target England until the night of 12-13 July, when nine Me 410s left Merville to again bomb London. Eight made it to the city, where, between 0245 hrs and 0255 hrs, they unloaded ten SC 250s and 24 SC 50s over areas north of the Thames, while the ninth was forced to jettison its ordnance in the Farnborough area as a result of instrument failure.



So far, so good. This all changed on the night of 15-16 July, however, when ten Me 410s were sent to London from Merville. Crossing the English coast individually between Margate and Herne Bay, eight of the Messerschmitts used their *Peil* direction-finding equipment to navigate to the capital, where, over a period of two-and-a-half hours, they dropped ten SC-250s and two SC-50s on the 'Greater London' area. Another Me 410 attacked the alternative target of Chelmsford. What the remaining aircraft did is not clear, but the *Gruppe* suffered a major loss when Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 0237 U5+CJ, flown by the *Kommandeur*, was attacked near Dunkirk by a Mosquito from No 85 Sqn on the return flight. The aircraft, which may also have suffered damage from anti-aircraft fire, failed to return to base. Hauptmann Methner and his radio operator, Unteroffizier Hubert Grube, were both posted as missing.



Eight 50 kg SC 50s loaded into the bomb-bay of an Me 210. Accuracy through dive-bombing was not possible with such a configuration, as this type of ordnance frequently failed to release (*EN Archive*)

OPPOSITE
The bomb-bay doors of the Me 210/410 had to be left ajar, as seen here, when some types of 1000 kg ordnance was uploaded. The drag this created adversely affected speed, manoeuvrability and safety (*EN Archive*)

Command of the *Gruppe* was passed to Major Wolf-Dietrich Meister, a veteran infantryman, airman and staff officer who, in 1935, had been sent to *Deutsche Luft Hansa* in Berlin, where he undertook training flights following the routes of railway lines. He later became an instructor pilot and was fluent in French and Swedish.

For the rest of 1943 and into January 1944, V./KG 2 prosecuted a determined air campaign against the British Isles on two levels – bombing missions and *Fernnachtjagd* (long-range intruder/nightfighter sorties). Towards the end of July 1943, on the nights of the 28th-29th and 29th-30th, the *Gruppe* mounted *Störangriffe* on London and Brighton, respectively, using formations of eight and nine aircraft, dropping SC 50 and SC 250 bombs from around 3000-4000 m. The Me 410 crews had to contend with considerable searchlight activity, and bombing results were impeded through limited visibility on both missions.

During the Brighton raid, 14./KG 2 Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 0114 U5+BJ of Oberleutnant Helmut Biermann and Unteroffizier Willi Kröger is believed to have been shot down by a Mosquito from No 256 Sqn, the aircraft crashing into the sea some 30 km south of Beachy Head.

From the beginning of August, the *Gruppe* had around 14 Me 410s on strength at any one time. These were used to undertake raids on an airfield near Cambridge on the night of the 10th-11th, with eight Me 410s carrying SC-50s and 35 *Abwurfbehälter* AB-23 bomb canisters loaded with two kilogramme SD-2 fragmentation bombs designed to 'pepper' runways. After this mission the *Gruppe* relocated from Merville to Vendeville before heading south again to Evreux on the 15th, presumably for intended operations against the south coast of England. The following day the unit moved back north again to Epinoy.

On the night of 22-23 August V./KG 2 again sortied in *Gruppe* strength on a major bombing and intruder operation that targeted RAF Bomber Command airfields and aircraft in the Cambridge area. Things did not go the raiders' way, however, with two Me 410s being lost.

The first aircraft shot down was 16./KG 2 A-1 Wk-Nr 10120 U5+HF, flown by Feldwebel Walter Hartmann and Obergefreiter Michael Meurer, which was intercepted at 0201 hrs by Mosquito XII pilot Flt Lt Geoffrey Howitt of No 85 Sqn flying from West Malling. Howitt pursued the Me 410, flying at a height of 6000 m, as it approached the Essex coast at Clacton-on-Sea and shot the bomber down when it was caught in the beams of searchlights. The Messerschmitt burst into flames and crashed at Chelmondiston, on the south bank of the River Orwell in Suffolk. By the time it hit the ground, the whole of the fuselage and centre section had been destroyed and the tail unit had broken away. Remarkably, however, the aircraft's bombload of two 250 kg bombs was found unexploded in the wreckage. Meurer survived by bailing out just before the tail section

separated from the rest of the aircraft (which had only been delivered to the unit hours before the mission), but Hartmann perished.

The second aircraft destroyed was 14. *Staffel* A-1 Wk-Nr 0228 U5+EE, crewed by Unteroffizier Hans-Johann Örtel and Feldwebel Martin Küfner. It fell to the guns of a Mosquito from No 29 Sqn 25 miles northeast of Foreness, on the Kent coast, at 0230 hrs. Both crewmen were lost without trace.

To some extent, events began to take a turn for the better for V./KG 2 from the following night as the unit began to focus on *Fernnachtjagd* operations. These proved to be a thorn in the side of RAF Bomber Command, for as the aircraft intruded into English airspace, the Me 410s became difficult to identify by radar. Indeed, they began to replicate similar missions being undertaken by Mosquito intruders over occupied Europe. The Messerschmitts carried out a campaign of targeting runways that duly forced the heavy bombers to orbit their airfields, often low on fuel as they returned from long-distance bombing missions, their crews tired, lacking in concentration and unsuspecting of attacks over friendly territory. Furthermore, at night, an Me 410 had more than a passing resemblance to a Mosquito, and so care had to be taken before the bombers' gunners engaged their potential opponents with defensive fire.

On the night of 24 August, the highly-decorated and very experienced Oberleutnant Wilhelm Schmitter, *Staffelkapitän* of 15./KG 2, took off on an intruder sortie with his radio operator, Feldwebel Heinz Gräber. Schmitter, who had begun his flying career in 1934, received the Knight's Cross on 19 September 1942 having undertaken several difficult special missions flying the Do 217 with II./KG 40.

On this particular night Schmitter and Gräber, flying Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 0214 U5+CF, inflitrated a stream of RAF bombers as they returned from a raid on Berlin. Over East Anglia, they closed in on a Lancaster B I flown by Sgt C S Chatten of No 97 Sqn, its crew being unaware of the German aircraft until Gräber opened fire with his barbette guns. The 13 mm rounds mortally damaged the Lancaster's fuselage and starboard wing. Despite being wounded in the attack, Chatten and five other crewmen managed to bail out – one of the gunners perished when the bomber crashed at Shouldham, in Norfolk.

Schmitter then flew on to drop eight bombs on an airfield to the west of Cambridge before turning for home. However, once out over the North Sea, the Me 410 was spotted by a No 85 Sqn Mosquito nightfighter that opened fire, damaging the fuselage and one engine so badly that Schmitter and Gräber were forced to bail out. As he abandoned his aircraft, the radio operator's legs struck the Messerschmitt's tail and both limbs were broken. So exhausted were the German airmen that they were unable to clamber into their dinghy, and they were very fortunate to eventually be picked up by a rescue boat from Zeebrugge after 90 minutes in the water.

Several pilots from V./KG 2 proved to be potent intruders. On the night of 3-4 September, the *Gruppe* despatched Me 410s from Schiphol, in the Netherlands, to intercept 320 bombers returning from a mission to Berlin. Leutnant Heinz-Günther Baack of 14. *Staffel* reported shooting down a 'twin-engined aircraft' over Lincoln, after which his *Zerstörer* dropped 1.84 tons of fragmentation bombs on several airfields in the area. On a less positive note, that same night the *Staffelkapitän* of 16./KG 2, Oberleutnant

Karl-Günther Näder, and his unnamed radio operator were lost when their Me 410, U5+NG, suffered engine failure 3.4 km east of Zeist as it returned from England. Näder was replaced by Hauptmann Karl-Egon von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels from the *Erprobungsstaffel* 410.

By 11 September, V./KG 2 had departed Epinoy and relocated to Schiphol, from where missions could be more effectively carried out against the airfields of Bomber Command. As if to prove this very point, the *Gruppenkommandeur*, Major Meister, shot down a Lancaster I of No 57 Sqn in the early hours of 23 September as RAF bombers returned from a raid on Hannover. Meister had attacked the Lancaster as it orbited its base at East Kirby, in Lincolnshire, setting the aircraft on fire. Two of the crew were able to bail out before it crashed near Spilsby. Meister would also score against the bombers on the nights of 9-10 and 14 October, although these victories took place in daylight against returning USAAF bombers over the Danish islands and Germany.

Oberleutnant Rudolf Abrahamczik from Silesia, who had recently been appointed *Staffelführer* of 14./KG 2, was another pilot to achieve an aerial victory in the Me 410 during this period. He was flying one of ten aircraft from the unit operating over Britain on the night of 27-28 September against the 678 bombers sent out to attack Hannover. While circling over the RAF airfield of Wickenby, in Lincolnshire, Abrahamczik spotted an approaching Lancaster III of No 101 Sqn. The unfortunate bomber had been diverted from its usual, but unserviceable, base of Ludford Magna, also in Lincolnshire, to Lindholme, in South Yorkshire, but as it flew over Wickenby Abrahamczik struck. The fire from his guns caused the bomber to hit the ground and explode, killing the entire crew.

Twelve Me 410s were active over large areas of England on the night of 2-3 October, attacking bomber airfields and other targets from the south coast to Cambridgeshire. Over the airfields they dropped SD 2 fragmentation bombs and SD 50s, while the secondary targets of Bedford, Norwich and Portsmouth were also targeted. Unteroffizier Heinz Holzmann of 14./KG 2 claimed two four-engined bombers shot down in the Bedford area, while Oberfeldwebel Wessel of 16. *Staffel* fired at two others as they made their landing approaches, but he was unable to observe results. Holzmann would go on to claim two more victories during the month over the North Sea and Hagenau, respectively.

Oberleutnant Rudolf Abrahamczik (centre), *Staffelführer* of 14./KG 2, is seen here having an animated discussion with Hauptmann Schmidt, the Operations Officer of V./KG 2 (left) and Oberleutnant Rüdiger Thiemann, Signals Officer, at either Merville, Athies or Vitry-en-Artois in late 1943 or early 1944. Behind is Abrahamczik's Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 017 U5+FE, with black undersides for night operations and flame dampers. Such measures did little to protect V. *Gruppe*'s aircraft from searchlight detection and nightfighter interception over England. Indeed, this aircraft was lost near Boulogne on the night of 2-3 January 1944 following a mission to London, its crew – Oberleutnant Helmut Schultze and Gefreiter Heinz Berger – being killed in the crash (*EN Archive*)

Further raids were mounted on the nights of 3-4 and 4-5 October against airfields in Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire and Norfolk, as well as around London, Southend and Brighton. From this point on British defences had adjusted to the raiders and, increasingly, the Me 410s had to deal with

searchlights and anti-aircraft fire. Nightfighters also began to take their toll, such as on 7-8 October when, while on a mission to London, Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 01085 U5+KG of Feldwebel Georg Slodozik and Unteroffizier Fritz Westrich of 16./KG 2 was shot down into the sea off Dungeness by a Mosquito of No 85 Sqn. Feldwebel Wilhelm Sohn of 14. *Staffel* also reportedly suffered a similar fate near Gravesend that night, although there are no records available to identify who his radio operator was, which aircraft they were flying or where it crashed.

By late October the *Gruppe* had returned to Epinoy, and in an illustration of the dangerous operating conditions now being increasingly endured by the Luftwaffe on the Channel Front, on the 26th Hauptmann von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels, leader of 16./KG 2, was wounded during an Allied raid on the airfield.

The following month, demands on the *Gruppe* increased and operations were flown both against targets in England as nocturnal *Störangriffe* as well as American bombers over Continental Europe in daylight *Zerstörer* missions. However, attrition was now beginning to take its toll.

On the night of 8-9 November 11 Me 410s were guided by two Ju 88 pathfinders to targets in greater London, as well as airfields in Kent, Sussex and Essex. Three Me 410s were lost, including two flown by the *Gruppe*'s more accomplished pilots. Hauptmann Wilhelm Schmitter, *Staffelkapitän* of 15./KG 2, flying Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 10244 U5+BF, was shot down by a Mosquito from No 85 Sqn near Eastbourne. He and his radio operator, Unteroffizier Felix Hainzinger, were posted missing and Schmitter was posthumously awarded the Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross. Also failing to return were the aforementioned Unteroffiziere Holzmann and Wilfred Fischer, who were shot down by a Mosquito from No 29 Sqn into the sea near Beachy Head in Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 10262 U5+JF. Their 14. *Staffel* comrades, pilot Feldwebel Toni Knie and Unteroffizier Ignaz Aberl, in Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 10311 U5+HE, likewise fell to a nightfighter in the form of a No 488 Sqn Mosquito. They crashed into the sea off Manston, in Kent. None of the aircrew survived.

Despite the increasing risk to aircraft and crews, raids against southern Britain continued for the rest of 1943, directed against London and military and civil airfields across East Anglia, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Sussex and Essex. When put into context, however, these were literally 'nuisance' raids – the damage and interference they caused to the Allied war effort was little more than that. The cost to the Luftwaffe was greater, with aircraft often returning damaged and having to crash-land. Furthermore, several Me 410s were lost on their home airfields after they were targeted by Allied bombers and intruders.

Losses among experienced crews were also hard to bear, such as that of Leutnant Baack and his radio operator, Unteroffizier Michael Strasser, of 14. *Staffel* who were shot down in Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 420085 U5+HE by a Mosquito of No 488 Sqn near Rye, in Sussex, on the night of 19-20 December 1943. Although Strasser bailed out and survived with severe injuries, Baack was killed. They were the last combat loss of the year to be inflicted on V./KG 2.

STEINBOCK

Commencing in June 1943, another *Gruppe* to convert to the Me 410A-1 was I./KG 51 under the command of Major Klaus Häberlen. Having returned to the Reich after serving on the Eastern Front with distinction since the opening of Operation *Barbarossa* in June 1941 as part of the renowned *'Edelweiss' Geschwader*, the unit relinquished its trusty Ju 88s at Illesheim and took delivery of its first three Messerschmitts. The crews were informed that they would be flying *Zerstörer* operations in the *Reichsverteidigung* and were sent off for an all too brief course in tactics from instructors at ZG 101, based at Memmingen.

Simultaneously, as more Me 410s trickled into the *Gruppe* during the summer of 1943, they were fitted with underwing mortars for deployment against enemy heavy bombers. However, after a relatively short but bitter experience as an air defence unit (see Chapter Six), I./KG 51 was sent to Lechfeld and Hörsching to retrain on instrument and blind-flying in preparation for bombing attacks against England, for which it was given a cadre of newly trained and inexperienced crews fresh from the schools.

Adapting to the Me 410 with a landing speed much greater than that of the Ju 88 proved a great challenge to many of the airmen, and during one week of night-flying, no fewer than three aircraft made belly-landings on the concrete runway after their pilots thought they had lowered their wheels.

Compounding these problems was the fact that any sense of stability and unit cohesion had been eroded by *Reichsmarschall* Göring's decision to remove Häberlen, who had received the Knight's Cross on 20 June 1943 for his leadership qualities and 297 missions flown over England, the Balkans and the Soviet Union, from command of the *Gruppe*. His dismissal had been prompted by his honest, but rash, comments to Göring about what he considered were the grave shortcomings of the Me 410 as an air defence aircraft. Häberlen was replaced by the newly promoted Oberstleutnant Wolf-Dietrich Meister, who arrived from V./KG 2.

Notwithstanding this, there was a great urgency to bring the unit up to something that approached operational readiness. Indeed, despite pressure from Göring, the commencement of what was christened Operation *Steinbock* (Ibex) was delayed until January 1944 while Peltz readied his aircraft and crews and ensured he had sufficient quantities of ordnance. At senior level, the overall campaign was known as *Capricorn* after the astrological sign period during which the raids were to begin, but operations were conducted as *Steinbock*.

On 6 December 1943 the first elements of I./KG 51 moved to their operational base at Evreux, while initially 1. *Staffel* went to St André and 2. *Staffel* to Dreux. In France, the *Gruppe* would fall under the tactical jurisdiction of Peltz's IX. *Fliegerkorps* and join 524 aircraft from 15 *Gruppen* that had been assigned to *Steinbock*, of which 462 were serviceable by 21 January.

Once the *Steinbock* aircraft had been mustered at their forward airfields across France, Belgium, the Netherlands and northern Germany, the campaign opened with intent on the 21st when Peltz targeted London with two waves of bombers drawn from all his units, as well as Fw 190s from I./SKG 10, under the codename Operation *Mars*. Me 410s of Major Kurt Heintz's V./KG 2 participated in both attack waves. According to captured

German aircrew, in the second wave, which involved around 200 aircraft and was directed at 'government buildings' in London, the Me 410s' role was to fly ahead of the He 177s of I./KG 40 and I./KG 100 and 'mark the target by means of incendiary bombs forming a large square that would be easily visible from a considerable height. The four corners of the square were to be marked with green and white flares'.

All went reasonably well and all the Me 410s returned except for one – Wk-Nr 103313 U5+WJ. As he made course for home, the *Gruppenkommandeur*, Major Heintz, was attacked by a Mosquito over Lydd Ranges, in Kent, and shot down. To have lost such an experienced unit leader who had been decorated with the Knight's Cross in October 1942 and who had flown with LG 1, KG 6 and KG 40 over France and Britain in 1940, then over the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Soviet Union, was an inauspicious start for *Steinbock*. At the time of his death, Heintz had flown 300 missions. His successor would be Hauptmann Karl-Egon von Dalwigk zu Lichtenfels.

Despite incendiaries landing around the 'government buildings' in Westminster and other parts of the city, militarily, Operation *Mars* was an abject failure, with only 32 bombs of the 282 dropped actually falling on London. Of 245 bomb damage incidents reported by the British authorities, 201 were outside the capital.

With February came more attacks. On the night of the 3rd-4th, another two-stage raid deploying 240 aircraft was directed at London, the first wave comprised only of light-payload Me 410s from V./KG 2 and Fw 190s from SKG 10. Sixteen Me 410s took off on a *Störangriff* from Vitry and together with the Fw 190s, between 2027 hrs and 2106 hrs, they dropped 12 SC 500, 30 SC 250 and four SB 70 bombs over the Greater London area. All the Me 410s returned, but one was damaged on landing. A small number of Me 410s joined the second wave in the early hours of the 4th, probably flare-dropping for the main bomber stream.

The reality was that the results of the 3-4 February raid failed to replicate the damage inflicted during a raid on 28 January – probably a reflection of the fact that relatively few bombers had actually released their loads over London. The attack time over the city lasted only 40 minutes. Badly hit, however, were areas of southwest London, where 27 houses were destroyed, 48 seriously damaged and a further 320 left with minor damage. There were five deaths and six serious injuries. To the east, hundreds of houses and shops and a school were damaged. Total casualties as a result of the raid were 31 killed and 88 injured, around half of whom were in Greater London.

Yet even for the relatively fast Me 410s, from early 1944 missions over England had become more dangerous than those of the previous year. The enemy's anti-aircraft defences and target-acquisition systems had been refined and were quick to bring a raider into an almost inescapable 'net' of searchlight beams and hold it there. Even at an altitude of 7000 m, the cockpits of the Me 410s would be lit up like daylight and crews did not need torches to read their maps. The enemy nightfighters had also grown in number and were faster in their response and intercepts.

On 6 February, V./KG 2 was redesignated II./KG 51, with 14./KG 2 becoming 4./KG 51 under Hauptmann Werner Düro, 15. *Staffel* becoming

Armourers load an Me 410A-1 ahead of an offensive mission over England in the spring of 1944. A pair of 250 kg bombs fitted to a rack lay on the ground before being hoisted by block and tackle into the bomb-bay, while the groundcrewman to the right holds a belt of 20 mm shells for the MG 151/20 cannon (*EN Archive*)

5./KG 51 under Oberleutnant Helmut Niebler and 16. *Staffel* becoming 6./KG 51 under Oberleutnant Wolfgang Baetz. The reformed unit numbered four Me 410A-1s and eighteen A-1/U2s.

The 'new' II./KG 51 was blooded in a raid on London on the night of 11 February when 13 Me 410s bombed targets along the Thames in the east of the city despite searchlights and heavy anti-aircraft fire. Several bombs fell on a sugar refinery. There were no losses, but yet again two aircraft were damaged on landing back at Vitry. The next night the *Gruppe* despatched 16 Me 410s to the British capital, along with Fw 190s of SKG 10, but the raid was ineffective and the unit's bombs fell scattered across Kent and Sussex with little damage being inflicted.

Small raids continued throughout February, but the last night of the month saw II./KG 51 return to the fray. On the morning of the 29th, the *Gruppe*'s Me 410s transferred from Vitry to Dinard in preparation for another strike on London. That evening, 14 aircraft took off, along with the same number of Fw 190s from I./SKG 10. Some were forced to return early due to mechanical problems, but those that flew on bombed the city in horizontal flight from 6500 m, once again under the threat from searchlights and anti-aircraft fire, although the nightfighters were absent.

After a delayed start, I./KG 51 was also committed to *Steinbock* in early March. Just a few minutes into the morning of the 14th, aircraft from both I. and II. *Gruppen* took off from St-André-de-l'Eure, Evreux and Dreux for a *Störangriff* on the coastal town of Worthing, in Sussex. Anti-aircraft fire over the target was patchy and bombs were dropped from 5000 m, with explosions observed by the crews. That night, the target was London again. Peltz deployed 187 aircraft, which dropped 228 tons of bombs. The Me 410s of I./KG 51 each carried two SC 250s, dropping them from 5000 m. There were no losses.

March also saw KG 51 carry out several raids on London, but on the night of 27th-28th the target was the docks in the western port city of Bristol. Peltz despatched aircraft from KG 2, KG 6, KG 30, KG 54 and KG 100, along with pathfinders from KG 66. A small number of Me 410s from I. and II./KG 51 also flew on the raid, dropping mainly SC 250s from 7500 m in level flight, although the aircraft of Feldwebel Hans-Erich Seemann of 6. *Staffel* was loaded with a single SC 1000 that he dropped in a gliding attack. During the course of the mission his Me 410A-1 suffered engine failure, and with only one DB 603 functioning, he managed to make it as far as Soesterberg, where he belly-landed.

One crewman from I./KG 51 recorded in his diary 'anyone who's going to make more than one trip over England these days needs the devil's own luck, and all the gods on his side too'.

Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 120005 9K+JH of 1./KG 51 suffered damage to its left wing and engine after colliding with an He 177 at an airfield in the Netherlands in early 1944 during the bombing campaign against England. It was later repaired and flew again, only to be shot down by a Mosquito nightfighter of No 456 Sqn while attempting to bomb London on the night of 19-20 April 1944. The aircraft crashed at Nuthurst, West Sussex, killing Leutnant Reinhold Witt and Unteroffizier Ernst Tesch (*EN Archive*)

Steinbock sputtered on into May, and I. and II./KG 51 continued to prosecute a few nuisance attacks on London, Brighton and Bristol. However, Peltz's efforts, whilst causing damage and loss of life in several locations, but mostly around London, did not amount to the campaign of retribution that Göring craved. The lack of accurate bombing was attributable in the main to the inexperience of many of the Luftwaffe crews and shortcomings in navigation methods. In reflecting upon the raids, Peltz remarked that, 'The attacks on the cities were like a few drops of water on a hot stone – a bit of commotion for a short time, then the whole thing was forgotten and people carried on much as before'.

From the end of March, II./KG 51 made a return to intruder operations, attacking Allied bombers and airfields in eastern England with its Me 410s. It was not just the RAF that fell prey to the intruders. At 0040 hrs on 12 April, a Pathfinder Force B-17 of the USAAF's 96th BG was approaching Parham airfield, in Suffolk, from where it was to fly as a pathfinder for the 390th BG's attack on Leipzig later that day. Two minutes later one of its wings exploded when the cannon shells from the Me 410 of Leutnant Wolfgang Wenning of *Stab* II./KG 51 hit it. The B-17 made an emergency landing at nearby Great Glemham House, colliding with trees and a brick wall. Shortly after, two of the B-17's 500-lb bombs and two sky-markers exploded, setting alight 1700 gallons of fuel and sending flames shooting 300 ft into the air – the blast had also broken windows in the vicinity. Three crew on board were killed and the remaining nine wounded.

Wenning was back over Britain on the night of 26/27 April, when his Me 410A-1, Wk-Nr 420445 9K+ZP, 'collided' with an Airspeed Oxford at 0430 hrs. There is evidence to suggest that having been shot up by the German raider, the Oxford's Canadian pilot, Flg Off G S Moore, deliberately rammed the Messerschmitt. Wenning (credited with seven aerial victories) and Feldwebel Gustav Delp were killed in the ensuing crash at Frankton, in Warwickshire.

Also notable among the pilots undertaking such missions was Hauptmann Dietrich Puttfarken, the 24-year-old *Staffelkapitän* of 5./KG 51. Puttfarken had served with KG 51 since 1940, gaining a fearsome tally of enemy merchant ships sunk and tanks, soft-skinned vehicles and locomotives destroyed from the Channel Front to the Balkans and the Soviet Union. He was awarded the Knight's Cross on 7 October 1942. While flying the Me 410 from the Netherlands in the spring of 1944, Puttfarken accounted for three enemy aircraft in four sorties, his

first two on the night of 11-12 April when he accounted for a Spitfire V of No 64 Sqn near Coltishall airfield and a Halifax of No 1654 Conversion Unit near Lincoln. A Lancaster went down to Puttfarken's guns over Norfolk on the night of 18-19 April.

On the night of 22-23 April, Me 410s launched 22 'disruptive' sorties in two waves over England. The first wave of 14 aircraft, which numbered Puttfarken and Wenning, shadowed B-24s of the 2nd Bomb Division as they returned from a raid to Hamm. In the space of 22 minutes the intruders claimed nine *Viermots* shot down and one probable. In reality, they accounted for 14 Liberators downed or damaged.

As part of the second wave comprising eight Me 410s, Puttfarken returned to lead a *Fernnachtjagd* to the Cambridge area, during which Unteroffizier Bongert of 4./KG 51 claimed a 'Halifax' shot down over Hethel airfield, southwest of Norwich – this was probably a B-24 of the 389th BG. The Liberator had received hits in its steering and hydraulics system, causing the pilot to lose control and overshoot the runway. The bomber ran into an airfield radar building, killing one crewman and injuring another.

However, this operation would prove the nemesis of Hauptmann Puttfarken, who failed to return along with his radio operator, Oberfeldwebel Willi Lux. It is possible that after receiving heavy damage, his Me 410, Wk-Nr 420314 9K+MN, crashed into the sea on its return to Soesterberg.

Hauptmann Dietrich Puttfarken, the 24-year-old *Staffelkapitän* of 5./KG 51, accounted for three enemy aircraft in four sorties while flying the Me 410 from the Netherlands in the spring of 1944. He was killed (along with his radio operator Oberfeldwebel Willi Lux) on the night of 22-23 April 1944 after his Me 410 crashed into the sea whilst returning from a *Fernnachtjagd* in the Cambridge area. By the time of his demise, Puttfarken had claimed five aerial victories (*Tony Holmes Collection*)

After the termination of regular bombing and intruder missions over England on 23 May 1944, most of I./KG 51 was returned to the Reich, where it would undergo retraining on the new Me 262. For a period, II./KG 51 was committed to operations against Allied forces following the invasion of Normandy. Such missions involved nightfighting against RAF raids, attacking advanced landing fields, gun positions, troop and transport assemblies and, in July-August, flying armed reconnaissance and ground attack missions.

On 10 August 1944, II./KG 51, under the command of Major Herbert Voss at Gilze-Rijen, in the Netherlands, reported 30 Me 410s and 22 crews on strength, but there was little that these aircraft could accomplish in the face of such an overwhelming Allied onslaught. From mid-August the *Gruppe* was also gradually withdrawn to Germany to commence conversion to the Me 262 at Schwäbisch-Hall.

I. and II./KG 51, along with IV. *Gruppe* (which conducted operational training), were equipped with the Me 410 for around nine months. During this time the three *Gruppen* lost 138 personnel while they bombed, intruded, reconnoitred and strafed over England and France. However, in the airspace over the Reich, the Me 410 was fighting a very different and very savage form of aerial warfare.

CHAPTER SIX

‘THE BACKBONE OF REICH DEFENCE’

The deployment of Me 210s and Me 410s as *Zerstörer* in the *Reichsverteidigung* was founded, essentially, on expediency. In summarising operations for April 1944, Generalleutnant Joseph Schmid, commander of I. *Jagdkorps*, noted that, ‘The attention of all responsible commanders in the *Reichsverteidigung* was focused on only one danger – the Flying Fortresses and their bomb loads’.

The plan was to urgently ‘refresh’ the *Zerstörer* units and implement a process of transition from ground attack and escort operations to missions against the rapidly increasing threat of USAAF four-engined bombers, where their presence was needed. Senior figures, including *Reichsmarschall* Göring, believed that the Me 410 would have the extended range needed to fight long aerial battles against the *Viermots*, as well as being able to serve as a capable platform to carry the heavier armament needed to ‘destroy’ bombers when enemy escort fighters were not present.

To do this, new crews were supplied by the operational training *Geschwader* ZG 101, commanded from January 1944 by Oberst Heinz Nacke, based at Memmingen and Bad Aibling. From the autumn of 1943, crews trained for the Me 410 were assigned to II./ZG 26 (this *Gruppe* having been formed from III./ZG 1) under Hauptmann Eduard Tratt

With the muzzle of its BK 5 covered against the elements, an Me 410A-1/U4 of 5./ZG 26 undergoes an engine test at Königsberg Neumark. This aircraft has not been fitted with the ZFR 4A gunsight. The gun on the aircraft behind, 3U+EN, has five or possibly six victory rings on its barrel, while the fighter in the foreground has two (*EN Archive*)

at Hildesheim and later Pfaffenhofen and Königsberg Devau. In March 1944, however, ZG 26's *Stab* and III. *Gruppe* also took on the Me 410 at Königsberg Devau, followed by I. *Gruppe* at Fassberg in April.

Also, in August 1943 ZG 76 had been re-formed and re-established under Oberstleutnant Theodor Rossiwall specifically for operations with *Zerstörer* armed with heavy calibre armament for combatting enemy bombers, its ranks drawn from various reconnaissance, nightfighter and school units. The nucleus of the I. *Gruppe* at Ansbach came from former Bf 110-equipped reconnaissance units. Initially retaining the Bf 110, I./ZG 76 converted to the Me 410 from April 1944.

II./ZG 76, based at Wertheim under the leadership of Major Herbert Kaminski, was built up from elements of ZG 101 and some nightfighter units, and as with I. *Gruppe*, it took on the Me 410 in April 1944. A III. *Gruppe* was formed at Öttingen in November 1943 with Bf 110s under Hauptmann Johannes Kiel, with detachments at Ansbach and Leipheim, but a shortage of aircraft forced the disbandment of this unit in February and its personnel were transferred to the Me 410-equipped I./ZG 76 instead. An *Erg.Staffel*/ZG 76 was also added in April 1944 under Hauptmann Hubertus Huy at Unterschlauersbach, the training unit being equipped with both Bf 110s and Me 410s.

Despite the creation of several Me 410-equipped *Gruppen*, the new Messerschmitt was not liked among veteran *Zerstörer* crews, despite it being more than 80 km/h faster than the Bf 110. The Me 410 was not as manoeuvrable as its predecessor, it was unable to absorb hits as well as the Bf 110 and it was harder to bail out of once on fire.

From a tactical perspective, the real value in the *Zerstörer* came in their ability to fire heavier weapons, such as large-calibre cannon and air-to-air mortars. In the case of the latter, admittedly, these had not been restricted to use on twin-engined fighters, but the *Zerstörer* were able to carry heavier weapon loads than the single-engined machines.

The investigation of these weapons and assessing their potential value in the frontline was the job of *Erprobungskommando* (E.Kdo) 25, a small unit formed in April 1943 at Wittmundhafen, in northwest Germany, under the command of the then Major Nacke, previously the *Kommandeur* of III./NJG 3. It had been created specifically to devise inventive and radical solutions to the growing threat posed by the USAAF's strategic bombers, which were attacking the Reich in daylight in ever-increasing numbers. Nacke's tenure in command of E.Kdo 25 was brief, however, and he was replaced, on a temporary basis, within a matter of weeks by Hauptmann Eduard Tratt, erstwhile *Staffelkapitän* of 1./ZG 1 on the Eastern Front.

Tratt was probably the most successful *Zerstörer* pilot of the war. He joined the Luftwaffe as a Fahnenjunker in 1937 and went on to serve with 1./ZG 1 during the Polish campaign, during which he was promoted to Leutnant. Over Dunkirk on 1 June 1940, he was able to shoot down three Hurricanes. In July 1940 Tratt was assigned to 1./*Erprobungsgruppe* 210 and flew many missions over England. The unit was renamed 1./SKG 210 and moved to the Eastern Front, where Tratt was not only successful in ground attack operations, destroying 24 Soviet tanks, but also shot down 20 aircraft.

In January 1942 Tratt joined 4./ZG 26, and in March of that year he was made *Staffelkapitän* of 6./ZG 26. He led 2./ZG 2 as of 1 May 1942,

and then held the same position with 1./ZG 1 as of 27 July 1942. Tratt received the Knight's Cross on 12 April 1942 after 20 aerial victories. On 30 January 1943 he was badly injured in a crash caused by engine failure – his radio operator was killed and his Bf 110G-2 written off. Following his recovery, Tratt was appointed *Kommandeur* of E.Kdo 25.

At Wittmundhafen Tratt went about arranging the establishment of three *Staffeln* for the embryonic *Kommando* – a *Jagdstaffel* equipped with Bf 109Gs and Fw 190s, a *Kampfstaffel* equipped with a small number of Do 217s and Ju 88s and a solitary He 177, and a *Zerstörerstaffel* under Leutnant Vossel, equipped with around ten Bf 110s, a single Me 210 and a pair of Me 410s. The latter *Staffel*'s primary task was to trial heavy calibre armament such as the 3.7 cm *Flak* 18 and *Flak* 43 and the five-centimetre *Flak* 41 anti-aircraft cannon. These weapons were tested in a variety of hand-fed, belt-fed and automatic configurations. In the Me 410, the cannon were installed with automatic side feed in the form of two six-round magazines for the *Flak* 18 and two of eight rounds for the *Flak* 43.

In a typical scene, probably at Illesheim, Me 410A-1 White 'F' or 'E', built at Augsburg in July 1943 as GH+YD, undergoes standard maintenance. The aircraft is fitted with twin WGr. 21 underwing mortar tubes for operations against USAAF daylight bombers. KG 51 commenced such operations as part of the *Reichsverteidigung* in September 1943, although after being withdrawn in early 1944 following heavy losses, its aircraft were switched to missions against England instead (*EN Archive*)

Generally, the results achieved with the Me 410 once such weapons had been installed were not encouraging, with the aircraft suffering from a loss of speed and manoeuvrability. Many minor problems also manifested themselves, with the *Flak* 18, in particular, suffering from stoppages. Despite weapons specialists from the *E-stelle* Tarnewitz and the manufacturer Rheinmetall-Borsig visiting E.Kdo 25 in early June 1943, the problems could not be rectified.

Initial deployment of the Me 410 in *Reichsverteidigung* operations came through E.Kdo 25 at Wittmundhafen, which gave the type its combat debut against the USAAF from June. The unit reported the loss of one Me 410 on the 11th whilst engaging bombers targeting Wilhelmshaven U-boat yards. The type was used again on 29 July in defence of Kiel.

In early June, following instructions issued by the *General der Jagdflieger*, 30 21 cm *Nebelwerfer* 42 mortar tubes together with 200 mortar shells (from the Wehrmacht) were delivered to I./JG 1 at Schiphol, with a further 34 tubes and 200 shells going to II./JG 26 in France. Designed as an infantry weapon, the mortar tubes were to be installed under the wings of Fw 190s for use as an air-to-air weapon against formations of American bombers, where the blast effect from a shell exploding within the confines of a formation would scatter the *Viermots*, thus weakening their defensive firepower and rendering individual bombers more vulnerable to attack. After the initial trials conducted by I./JG 1, overseen by Tratt, it was felt further investigation was warranted by E.Kdo 25.

A rifled mortar launching tube, 1.3 m in length, was suspended from beneath each underside wing surface of a fighter by means of four bracing lugs and a central hook with a suspension bracket. Three retaining springs, located near the rear end of the tube, held the 112 kg shell with its 40 kg warhead in place and a screw bolt, also at the rear end of the tube, prevented the shell from sliding out. In an emergency, the launching tube could be jettisoned by activating an electrically-primed explosive charge that severed the central hook.

The mortars were controlled from a cockpit armament panel containing two armament switches and a Revi 16B reflector sight. In single-engined fighters, two spin-stabilised shells were fired simultaneously when the pilot depressed a button on his control column. The mortar shells were fitted with a time fuse, pre-set at 800 m, prior to delivery to an operational unit and were not subsequently adjusted. The firing range was therefore invariable, and the weapon's low velocity meant that to be effective, it had to be aimed 60 m above its target and the shell had to detonate within 28 m of a bomber.

The weapon was used operationally in quantity for the first time on 28 July 1943 during a USAAF raid on Kassel and Oschersleben, and results were acceptable in as much as fragmentation from blast did break up the bombers and a number were claimed destroyed as an indirect result. Indeed, in August, *General der Jagdflieger*, Generalmajor Adolf Galland, instructed all Bf 110 and Me 410 units based around the Deutsche Bucht (German Bight) to fit two 21 cm tubes under each wing of their aircraft. Me 410As of ZG 26 were duly equipped with pairs of twin mortar sets in addition to cannon and machine guns.

To deploy the *Zerstörer* effectively required a situation where the aircraft could operate beyond the range of American escort fighters and exclusively against the *Viermots*. If this could be achieved, then any lack of manoeuvrability on the part of the Me 410 would not be compromised by the addition of heavier armament. Thus, a range of mortar installations and heavy cannon was fitted to the aircraft, as the Luftwaffe was confident that USAAF escort fighters lacked the range to engage *Zerstörer* over Germany in 1943. With such weapons, a formation of bombers could be fired at and broken up from beyond its effective zone of defence. Once a formation had been successfully scattered, individual bombers could be attacked and destroyed.

The *General der Jagdflieger*, Generalmajor Adolf Galland, is seen here at far left during an inspection visit to *Erprobungskommando* 25 at Achmer in November 1943. Accompanying Galland is the commander of E.Kdo 25, Hauptmann Horst Geyer (second from left), and other senior officers from Galland's staff and the *Kommando*. The unit's Me 410s seen here are fitted with *Flak* 43 cannon and ZFR 4A telescopic gunsights, while what appears to be a Bf 110 under a tarpaulin further down the line of aircraft has WGr. 21 underwing mortar tubes (*EN Archive*)

Wherever possible, the component *Gruppen* of a *Zerstörergeschwader* were based on airfields within close proximity to each other. Upon receiving an order to *Start*, take-off took place in four-aircraft *Schwärme*. A *Gruppe* of Me 410s would assemble in columns by *Staffeln*, make a wide, left turn over the airfield and climb to the *Geschwader* assembly point,

which lay over a prominent geographical location or, in bad weather, over a radio beacon. At the assembly point, the *Gruppen* formed up into columns, and in cases of a mixed Bf 110/Me 410 force, the Bf 110s would take the lead. Upon sighting the enemy, the formation deployed into a line. This would need to be stepped up if the *Gruppe* was expecting to use 21 cm mortars.

After discharging their mortars, which took place at a range of 700-900 m, the Me 410s closed up and an attack was made with machine guns and cannon. Standard *Revi* C 12/D or *Zielfernrohr* ZFR 4A gunsights were used to assess the range required for the mortars. The latter were fired upon receipt of an order broadcast over the radio by the formation leader. In attacks from the front or the side of an enemy formation, there was a tendency to overshoot, while attacks made from the rear frequently fell short. However, the most practical and ballistically efficient direction of attack was from dead astern. The *Zerstörer* then headed home after firing their mortars.

Major Klaus Häberlen's I./KG 51 at Illesheim flew its first missions against the bombers on 6 September when it sent up seven mortar-armed Me 410s to intercept a raid by 338 B-17s on aircraft industry targets in Stuttgart. In heavy cloud, the bombers became separated and scattered, creating ideal circumstances in which the *Zerstörer* could operate. Nevertheless, the crews of KG 51 still found their task daunting as they engaged the second wave of bombers at 5000 m, firing their mortars in shallow-curved trajectories.

Despite the blast wave, the bombers flew on, and moments later the Me 410s were amongst them, drawing their defensive fire. The aircraft of Leutnant Eberhard Winkel of 1. *Staffel* had one of its engines shot away, the pilot then diving below the enemy formation and ordering an emergency jettisoning of fuel from the reserve tank, followed by the ammunition. By doing this Winkel was able to retain altitude and limp back to Illesheim on one engine.

Overall, I./KG 51's combat debut with the Me 410 *Zerstörer* had been a disaster, with the *Gruppe*'s losses equating to the number of bombers it had shot down.

Another notable heavy weapon that appeared in the armoury of the Me 410 was the Rheinmetall five-centimetre BK (*Bordkanone*) 5 cannon, adapted from a tank cannon. The Luftwaffe *Technisches Amt* had issued a requirement for a gun with a muzzle velocity of at least 600 m per second and a rate of fire of 300 rounds per minute, the concept being to have a weapon capable of inflicting almost certain damage on enemy bombers, but without the attacking aircraft coming within range of the enemy's defensive fire. However, the dichotomy was that while there was a requirement for accuracy and extremely low dispersion, due to the heavy-calibre ammunition required, it would be impossible to achieve a high rate of fire. Every shot would have to count. The two aircraft selected to trial such a weapon were the Me 410 and Ju 88.

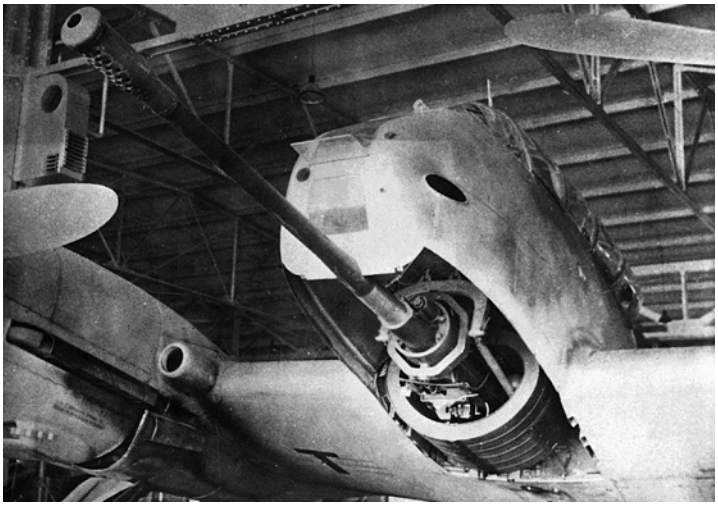
The idea of using a five-centimetre cannon in the Me 410 was first proposed by officers on the staff of the *General der Jagdflieger* to E.Kdo 25 in July 1943. The weapon they envisaged being used was an adaptation of the Wehrmacht's five-centimetre KwK (*Kampfwagenkanone*) 39 tank

gun. Using the *Revi* 12C/D or *Zielfernrohr* ZFR 4A telescopic sight, a hit with one five-centimetre round was thought to be enough to bring down a bomber. However, effective employment of the ZFR 4A required considerable gunnery and flying skill, or much practice, as well as the ability to stay in a stable firing position for a long period of time.

The alterations required to fit the big gun into an aircraft such as the Me 410 were thought acceptable, given that this would avoid the development of a new weapon. Furthermore, the incorporation of a magazine would make the cannon fully automatic, and the gun, the mounting and magazine-feed mechanism could be assembled as one unit to make it easily interchangeable. Loading was performed electro-pneumatically, whilst the ammunition was fired by an electric primer. Recoil was taken by two hydro-pneumatic cylinders mounted above the gun cradle.

In the Me 410, the rear part of the gun was fixed to the main spar via an adjusting mechanism on a plate, and the bomb-bay doors were removed and replaced by a ventral fairing. The installation of the gun proved so satisfactory that the outline of the ventral fairing needed only to be increased by some 100 mm at its deepest point as compared with the original doors. A cartridge ejection opening with an internally-mounted chute was cut into the rear of the panel. By using a perforated muzzle-brake, muzzle blast was so distributed over the airframe that no damage was caused, and therefore no reinforcement necessary. The only problem was the challenge of keeping the gun heated at altitude, and thus heating was provided from the crew compartment.

The gun was hoisted into an Me 410 by means of a large, mobile hydraulic jack known as a *Steinbock*. The muzzle end of the barrel was fastened by means of a rope to the arm of the *Steinbock*, which was then pumped up until the rear end of the mounting was inclining upwards. The *Steinbock*, together with the gun, was then run in under the fuselage and the weapon raised until the clamp of the setting mechanism was in line with the plate fixed to the main spar. Two locking bolts were then screwed in. A gimbal ring, a pair of lateral bracing tubes and a suspension stirrup were used to secure the mounting of the gun.

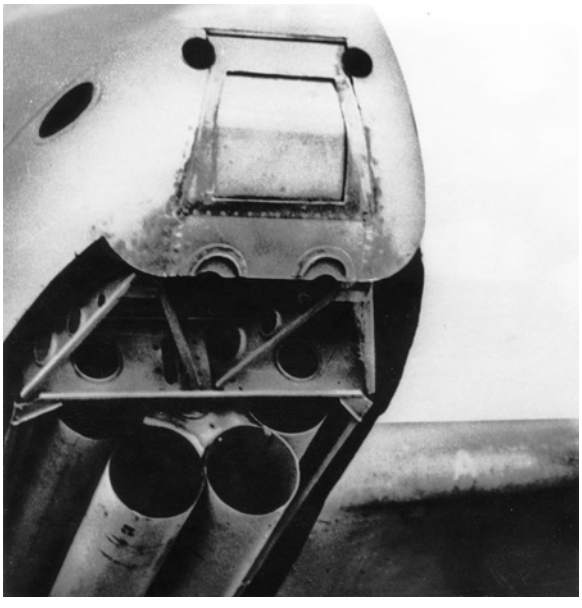


The view looking up into the installation of the Rheinmetall five-centimetre BK (*Bordkanone*) 5 gun in an Me 410A-1/U4. In an arc over the forward mechanism is the bracket from which the cannon is suspended, while behind that is the encompassing, oval 'ring' magazine. While the gun proved trouble-free and quick to mount and remove, it was less successful in action (*EN Archive*)

By late October it seems Galland's office had revised its opinion of the BK 5, and it now felt that a rapid-fire weapon such as the MK 103 would be better. Nevertheless, when, in November 1943, Hitler watched a demonstration of an Me 410A-1 equipped with a BK 5 cannon, he enthused that it was the 'backbone of the home air defence'. The *Führer* demanded that the Me 410 be committed to Reich defence, and that two *Gruppen* or a *Geschwader* be equipped with the aircraft/weapon combination.

Göring had to pluck up courage and advise Hitler that only two or three aircraft could be equipped with the BK 5, since there were no further cannon available. His advice having fallen on stony ground, and in view of the fact that the bulk of Me 410s had been assigned to bomber *Gruppen* for operations over England, the *Reichsmarschall* instructed Milch on 12 January 1944 to set about equipping two *Gruppen* with 45 cannon-fitted aircraft each. Milch wrote to Göring in response two days later;

'The first experimental aircraft have been equipped with a 50 mm gun. Since this gun can no longer be delivered, a conversion for a new 50 mm gun had to be carried out within a very short period of time. This new gun is installed in a different manner. The first delivery of ten guns was to be made in December. This was not possible since the magazine feeding device which we constructed suffered stoppages due to broken belt links, whereby the cartridge was hitched on the belt conveyer table. These defects have now been eliminated. There have been difficulties experienced with the high-explosive shell we developed on account of casting defects in the casings and also in respect to its dispersion because of the rotating bands. Alterations are being carried out in the plants. The results have still to be tested.'



In February 1944, at the *Erprobungsstelle* Tarnewitz, Me 410B-1 Wk-Nr 425416 was fitted with an experimental, six-tube, revolving 21 cm mortar battery in a modified bomb-bay for operations against enemy *Viermots*. Intended to disperse a bomber formation, the installation proved too dangerous to the carrier aircraft and was abandoned (*EN Archive*)

Once initial investigation into the BK 5-equipped Me 410 V2 had been carried out at Tarnewitz, adaptation of the gun for aerial use was undertaken by *Deutsche Luft Hansa* at Berlin-Staaken. After just over three months of testing, during which various belt-feed and jamming malfunctions had been ironed out, the resulting weapon was installed in aircraft of II./ZG 26 as the Me 410A-1/U4 from early February 1944.

The *Gruppe* moved from Hildesheim to Oberpfaffenhofen to re-equip, and by the 8th, 5. *Staffel* had 12 cannon-equipped aircraft. Trial operations duly commenced over southern Germany and Austria, despite the fact that the weapon was still experiencing electrical problems, small switches were found to break easily and ammunition belts continued to fall apart. Also, the BK 5's recoil and feed mechanisms were unable to cope with the g-forces of aerial combat, and it was rare for more than one shell to be fired without the weapon jamming. These issues were mitigated to some extent by the introduction of an improvised clearing device.

Generally, however, the employment of large-calibre guns, forced onto the units by Göring and the high command, proved a fallacy. It would have been better to have used unguided rockets then under development.

In October 1943, the daylight battle over the Reich reached its zenith, forcing the USAAF to accept that unescorted, deep penetration formations could not adequately protect themselves. However, although the losses incurred during such missions had reached unacceptable levels, they nevertheless forced the Luftwaffe into the air to fight, and in doing so inflicted attrition on a scale from which the Germans would find it difficult to recover.

On 10 October, the *Kommodore* of ZG 26, Major Karl Boehm-Tettelbach, led his Bf 110s, together with Me 410s of III./ZG 1, from Hesepe and Osnabrück against B-17s of the 3rd Bomb Division during an attack on the marshalling yards at Münster. The 3rd's B-17s, left without any escort due to bad weather over England, had already been mauled by single-engined fighters when the 14th Bombardment Wing was particularly badly hit near Münster by the *Zerstörer* in a mass attack from the rear. Indeed, it was to be their single most successful day, with the Bf 110s of ZG 26 claiming 14 B-17s destroyed. Conversely, and somewhat inexplicably, the Me 410s of III./ZG 1 returned with no laurels.

Nor did missions by I./KG 51 in early October achieve much. On the 14th 229 of 291 B-17s despatched managed to reach Schweinfurt in a return to the aircraft industry targets that had proved so costly to the USAAF in August. Under direction of the *Jagdfliegerführer Ostmark*, the Me 410s of I./KG 51 took off from Hörsching and headed west until they made visual contact near Schweinfurt, where the bombers had already unloaded their ordnance on the city's ball-bearing factory. The Messerschmitts chased the bombers, fired their mortars and followed them in towards the enemy formation. Once again, the Me 410s found themselves trapped by the bombers' highly effective defensive fire, and the *Gruppe* was lucky to escape without loss – but neither did it make any claims. It proved to be the unit's last such mission before being reassigned for missions over England (see Chapter 5).

Towards the end of 1943, the presence of American escort fighters became a real problem, and tactics were adapted accordingly. The first measure was to pull the Me 410 bases back. There was also an attempt to assign, loosely, one fighter *Gruppe* to each *Zerstörergruppe*. For operations where enemy escort was anticipated, the *Zerstörer* units often removed their underwing mortar tubes in order to increase manoeuvrability. Where coordination worked, the assigned *Jagdgruppe*, whose leader would be in contact with the *Zerstörer* leader, would fly close escort to the *Zerstörer*, with two *Staffeln* flying in *Schwärme* on either side and behind, while the third *Staffel* flew as top cover 1800 m higher. During early operations, the fighters were ordered not to engage the bombers until the *Zerstörer* had carried out their attack.

The *Zerstörer* would then attack head-on in a column of *Schwärme*. After passing through the enemy formation once from the front, the next *Pulk* (group) would be attacked in a similar way, or the *Zerstörer* would curve back in and attack it from the rear, continuously in *Schwärme*.

As captured by the gun camera of a USAAF escort fighter, an Me 410 fitted with four 21 cm mortar tubes has been hit and is trailing smoke from its left engine, while flames streak back from the fuselage (*EN Archive*)

In late August one of E.Kdo 25's Me 410s had been flown to Vechta, where the airfield workshop set about installing a *Flak* 43 in the aircraft. This weapon promised a higher rate of fire (240 rounds per minute) than the *Flak* 18 (60 rounds per minute), but by the end of November satisfactory experiments had still not been carried out. Nevertheless, there was a hope that a *Schwarm* of Me 410s could be so fitted and used operationally on a trial basis. Much of this experimentation was driven by the expectancy that the USAAF would at some point deploy the B-29 Superfortress over Germany, and so it would be essential to prepare a fighter in good time that would have the power to reach altitudes of between 9000-11,000 m and engage in air combat.

Leutnant Meyer strokes one of two mascots at Königsberg Neumark with five Me 410s of II./ZG 26 behind him. Nearest to Meyer is Me 410A-1/U4 Wk-Nr 420292 3U+CC, which is fitted with a BK 5 cannon. Note the attached generator cart. The aircraft is known to have been assigned to the *Gruppe Stab* at one point (*EN Archive*)

In this regard, on 9 November 1943, Oberst Edgar Petersen of the *Kommando der Erprobungsstellen* wrote to the RLM advising that following discussions with the *General der Jagdflieger* and personnel of E.Kdo 25, it was proposed to develop a 'prototype' Me 410 at Rechlin fitted with GM-1 power boost, a ZFR 4A telescopic sight and armament comprising either four MG 151/20s and two MG 131s, or two MG 151/20s and one BK 5, or two MG 151/20as and one Flak 43, or two MG 151/20s and two MK 103s.

By February 1944, whilst the Luftwaffe had formed a well-organised and efficient air defence network, it was numbers – or lack of them – both in terms of adequately trained pilots and aircraft that was its nemesis, while the USAAF steadily increased its strength, quality, experience and determination. With I./KG 51 gone and III./ZG 1 having moved to western France, where it would convert to the Ju 88C, II./ZG 26, under the command of Eduard Tratt since October, was the sole Me 410-equipped *Gruppe* left in the *Reichsverteidigung*. With II./ZG 26's aircraft boasting

Single-seater Me 410A-1/U3 Wk-Nr 10117 'Yellow 7' of II./ZG 26 on a grey day at Hildesheim in February 1944. Completed at Augsburg in early August 1943, the aircraft had its radio mast and 13 mm FDSL-B 131 gun barbettes removed and was probably power-boosted by the inclusion of a GM 1 system in order to save weight and increase performance (*EN Archive*)

four underwing mortars and four 20 mm cannon, but with the defensive 13 mm barbette machine guns removed, for a newly qualified pilot, an assignment to the unit was tantamount to 'buying a one-way ticket'.

One such pilot was Fritz Buchholz, who joined 6./ZG 26 on 3 February at Hildesheim from the 2./*Erg.Zerstörergruppe* at Braunschweig-Waggum. He later recalled;

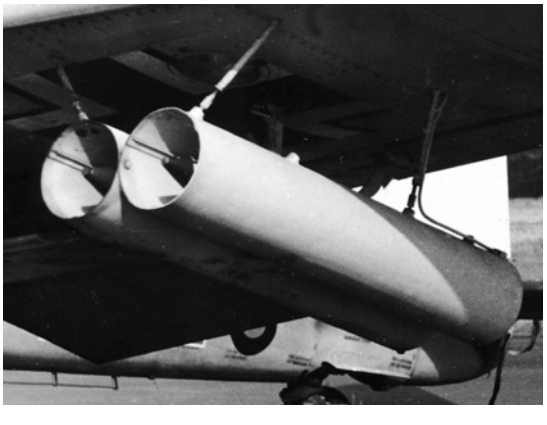
'The Me 410 was a mixed bag. It had good, stable flying characteristics, but it wasn't good in the turn – here the Bf 110 was better. Other than that, when flying the aircraft, generally there were few problems. In air combat, however, it was a different story. For a start, it was easy prey for enemy fighters, and when flying in formation it was unwieldy. The Me 410 also made a nice, big target for the bomber gunners.

'Generally, we were ineffective. The *Zerstörer* units were too slow and unmanageable. Our *Gruppe* was frequently the target for enemy fighters, which meant we only ever got a short time to deal with the bomber *Pulks*. There was rarely a chance to make a second formation attack because after our first attack the enemy formation was usually broken up. Also, the way the Americans staggered their formations was very effective, and it made it very difficult for us to attack.

'The increasing numbers of escort fighters made a hard job harder, and whenever they appeared we were usually forced to break off because of the risk of being shot down due to our lack of adequate defensive armament. Our ground-controllers always tried to get us to the bombers when there were no fighters in the vicinity. Most of our crews just focused on safety and survival – there were few daredevils.

'After breakfast at around 0800 hrs, there was an operational briefing at battle HQ. Here, a large black table would be covered in small yellow markers that featured the names of the crews and their formation positions in the air. A meteorologist would brief us on the expected weather situation over the enemy airfields in England and over the likely operational areas in Germany.

'As soon as word came through that the bombers had taken off in England, we were placed on 60 minutes readiness. When they had assembled and were en route, we were ordered by loudspeaker to go to 30 minutes readiness. At that point we went to our aircraft. At ten minutes readiness, we pulled on our lifejackets and flare cartridge belts and gathered our maps and other items. We were also advised on the course and progress of the bombers. Once at cockpit readiness, we waited for the yellow star flare to be fired and then started take-off procedure. Up until March 1944, our Me 410s were fitted with four 21 cm mortars and four 20 mm cannon, but from April to August 1944 they carried the BK 5 cannon.



Two WGr. 21 air-to-air mortar tubes suspended beneath the wing of an Me 410. The fuse tips of the loaded shells are visible. The mortar was adapted from an infantry weapon and was designed to blow up individual bombers through blast or scatter their formations to break down cohesion and defensive firepower (*EN Archive*)

'With the BK 5, it was best to attack the upper part of the rear of the enemy formation at an angle of ten degrees. However, because of the bombers' rear defensive guns, and our lengthy approach, this was not popular. Due to the shell's trajectory, we often fired too early. We were also hampered by many stoppages.'

In February 1944 the Eighth Air Force launched Operation *Argument* or 'Big Week' – an intense

bombing campaign against German aircraft production centres (specifically against the plants responsible for the output of fighters) commencing on the 20th.

On 22 February, during a major raid involving nearly 1400 USAAF bombers attacking targets spread across Germany, the *Staffelkapitän* of 5./ZG 26, Oberleutnant Fritz Stehle, led ten Me 410A-1/U4s from Oberpfaffenhofen against 183 B-17s and B-24s of the Fifteenth Air Forces heading for Regensburg. Although this would be the first operation on which the BK 5 would be used in combat, it was still classified as a practice flight. Shortly before 1300 hrs, Feldwebel Baunicke opened fire with his five-centimetre gun and shot down the weapon's first bomber. Around ten minutes later, Stehle claimed another south of Dachau. What this 'practice flight' told crews was that they would need to get within 400 m of the bombers to score a hit, rather than the 800-900 m as claimed by the armament handbook.

This day also brought a serious loss when Hauptmann Tratt and his gunner, Oberfeldwebel Gillert, were shot down and killed over Nordhausen. He had claimed a B-17 minutes before his death, although this was one of four victories that remained unconfirmed. Tratt was officially credited with 35 victories (including four *Viermots*, with two more unconfirmed), making him the ranking *Zerstörer* ace. He was posthumously promoted to Major.

Defying aviator superstition, ranking *Zerstörer* ace Hauptmann Eduard Tratt (left), *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./ZG 26, allows himself to be photographed on 22 February 1944 talking with Unteroffizier von Libau prior to a mission. In the centre background is Leutnant Wedige-Bogislav von Glasenapp, *Staffelkapitän* of 4./ZG. Both Tratt and von Glasenapp are wearing much-prized Irvin jackets 'liberated' from captured British bomber crewmen. Tratt would be killed on the very day this photograph was taken, while von Glasenapp (credited with four aerial victories) was lost on 7 July (*EN Archive*)

On 24 February the crew of Oberfeldwebel Willi Frös and Unteroffizier Gerhard Brandl of 5./ZG 26 shot down a B-17 of the Fifteenth Air Force at 6000 m over Steyr during an attack on the aircraft plant there. Frös would be accredited with three *Viermots* destroyed. More missions with the BK 5 would be flown throughout the spring and summer of 1944, but they brought virtually no success. Furthermore, the operational losses suffered by aircraft fitted with such armament were disproportionately high in the relatively few missions flown, with their envisaged capability nullified by loss of aircraft speed and the defensive fire of enemy bombers.

From March 1944, P-51 Mustangs of the Eighth Air Force were able to accompany the bombers on deep penetration raids, ranging east as far as Stettin, Berlin and Munich, while Vienna came within reach of the Fifteenth Air Force – its bombers also received Mustang escorts from the spring. As a consequence, losses among the Me 410 units began to escalate, often because the single-engined fighters assigned as their escorts were drawn into self-defence.

Nevertheless, tactics remained fundamentally the same, although from May 1944, wherever strength and time permitted, efforts were made to form mixed *Gefechtsverbände* (battle formations) of Me 410s and single-engined escort fighters. Such *Gefechtsverbände* were led by the *Kommodore* of a *Jagdgeschwader* along with his *Stab Schwarm*. Mission success now rested on either skilful vectoring and formation leadership or, simply, being lucky enough to meet a bomber formation whose fighter escort was not on hand at a given moment. On the few occasions circumstances worked in the favour of the German defence, carnage could be inflicted

Having just returned from an operational flight, Oberfeldwebel Willi Frös of 5./ZG 26 stands on the wing root of his Me 410B-1 at Königsberg Neumark in May 1944 to be greeted by his ground crew. Visible is the ZFR 4A telescopic gunsight protruding through the armoured windscreen. Frös, who is holding a bandolier of flare cartridges in his hand, is believed to have claimed five *Viermots* shot down (*EN Archive*)

Pristine Me 410B-1/U4s of 5./ZG 26 gathered at Königsberg Neumark in the spring of 1944. The aircraft are fitted with long-barrelled BK 5 cannon, a weapon adapted from a tank gun. It was known that used effectively, a hit with one five-centimetre round was enough to bring down a heavy bomber (*EN Archive*)

on an American formation. In this regard, the partnership between the Me 410s of II./ZG 26 and the Bf 109Gs of Major Walther Dahl's III./JG 3 proved to be particularly successful.

On 6 March, the USAAF despatched a force of 730 bombers, with a formidable escort of 796 fighters drawn from 19 fighter groups of the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces, to bomb Berlin. Bitter fighting raged from the moment the bomber streams crossed the Dutch coast, and it lasted all the way to the German capital and back.

The Luftwaffe fielded a large *Gefechtsverband* comprising a lead element of 41 Bf 110s and Me 410s from 5./ZG 26 and I. and II./ZG 76, many equipped with underwing batteries of mortars intended to break up the approaching enemy formation, followed by 72 Bf 109s and Fw 190s. However, P-51s dived out of the sun to intercept, and in doing so forced the *Zerstörer* to break off their attacks early. The result was that many mortar shells exploded way off target. By the end of the mission, of the seven Bf 110s of III./ZG 26 that went into action, five had been destroyed and the remaining two damaged. Eleven further *Zerstörer* were destroyed and at least two more damaged. The carnage inflicted on 5./ZG 26 was even worse, with seven Me 410A-1/U4s being lost over the Döberitz-Brandenburg-Bernburg area – equivalent to 75 per cent of the *Staffel*'s strength.

On 11 April the USAAF launched an all-out assault against centres of aircraft production in eastern Germany. A record-breaking force of 917 B-17s and B-24s was assembled to strike at various aircraft assembly plants. This enormous armada was protected by more than 800 fighters, although with bomber resources stretched over such a wide range of deep penetration targets, even this escort was barely adequate. In response, I. *Jagdkorps* sent up a total of 432 single- and twin-engined fighters drawn from 1., 2. and 3. *Jagddivision*.

Controlled by 1. *Jagddivision*, the Me 410s of II./ZG 26, now under the command of former nightfighter pilot Hauptmann Günther Weyl, took off on their first mission from Königsberg Neumark. The *Gruppe*, along with the Bf 110s of III./ZG 26, would engage the B-17s of the 3rd Bomb Division over the Baltic, northwest of Kolberg. The Me 410A-1/U4s claimed between

eight and ten Flying Fortresses shot down, although these successes again came at a heavy price. II./ZG 26 lost no fewer than eight aircraft, from which just four of sixteen crewmen survived.

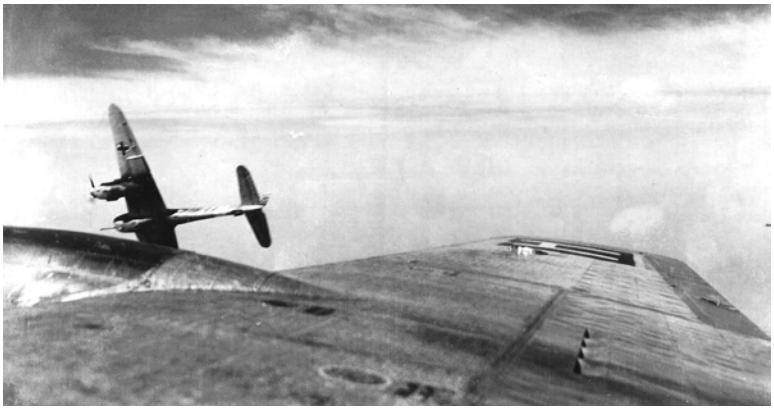
The Americans' targets on 12 May were the synthetic fuel plants and refineries at Leuna-Merseburg, Böhlen, Zeitz, Lützkendorf and Brüx – deep penetration locations for which the *Zerstörer* would again be brought to bear. Under clear skies, and up against a force of 886 B-17s and B-24s, 30 aircraft from II./ZG 26 took off in the early afternoon led by Hauptmann Weyl. This time, amongst the Me 410A-1/U4s was at least one aircraft – 'Black 13' – formerly of E.Kdo 25 fitted with a *Flak* 43 cannon. This weapon featured a wider muzzle brake and longer barrel than the BK 5. The aircraft was crewed by Leutnant Paul Kaschuba (pilot) and Feldwebel Karl Bredemeier, who had both recently been seconded to II./ZG 26 from E.Kdo 25. What followed proved to be another draining, savage mission, as Gefreiter Richard Wilde later recalled;

'The *Kommandeur*, Hauptmann Günther Weyl, set up the attack by bringing us in behind the B-17s on a wide curving right-hand turn, with a slight height advantage allowing for accurate firing. Following a corresponding order, he broke off his own attack very early, while the rest of the group continued the attack to the closest range. During our closing approach my right neighbour caught fire. Dark red flames with a deep black smoke appeared in the front under the hull. The flames billowed out about one or two fuselage lengths behind the tailplane. Almost certainly the cannon rounds were burning, which also happened to me shortly thereafter. As I recall, the aircraft peeled away to the right with a half-roll.

'I managed seven or eight firing rounds with the heavy cannon on the approach with no problems. Not a single jam. Even the smaller cannon worked well that day. I could see the impacts of my firing on the right inboard engine of the B-17 and now fired the cannon hoping for a direct hit in the fuselage. As I was attacking, I took numerous hits as we closed in. I could hear the impacts and see their effects on the port wing. There were streaks of oil around the port engine.'

Elsewhere, Leutnant Kaschuba and Feldwebel Bredemeier also went into attack with their *Flak* 43-equipped 'Black 13'. Following recent research

Me 410 Wk-Nr 10241 was finished at Augsburg in late August 1943 and given the factory code SI+TP. It was later assigned to the weapons evaluation and testing unit E.Kdo 25, where it became 'Black 13' and was fitted with a 3.7 cm *Flak* 43 cannon. The aircraft was test-flown by Leutnant Paul Kaschuba and his radio operator Feldwebel Karl Bredemeier, who were subsequently detached with it to II./ZG 26 for operational trials against bombers. They were shot down by defensive fire from a B-17 in 'Black 13' on 12 May 1944, both airmen being killed (*EN Archive*)



This photograph was taken by crewman Victor Labruno from B-17G 42-97184 *Lady Godiva* of the 562nd BS/388th BG as an Me 410 passed close by on its starboard side after engaging the bomber during the raid on Brüx on 12 May 1944. The *Zerstörer* was almost certainly Me 410 Wk-Nr 10241 'Black 13', flown by Leutnant Paul Kaschuba and Feldwebel Karl Bredemeier. They crashed to their deaths minutes after the shot was taken, their aircraft's starboard engine having been set on fire by 0.50-calibre rounds fired by one of the B-17's gunners (*NARA*)

conducted by Paul Kaschuba's nephew, Gerd Kaschuba, it is most likely that their target was B-17G 42-97184 *Lady Godiva* of the 562nd BS/388th BG, which was part of the formation bombing Brüx. The pilot flying the bomber, 1Lt Manuel Head, wrote subsequently;

'As I recall, the 388th BG was attacked from the rear – I saw nothing of the combat with the exception of this Me 410 peeling away just off my starboard wing. I well remember my exclamation, "*What the hell is he doing here?!*" and in a fraction of a second he was gone. Victor Labruno took a pic of the aircraft from the right-hand window of the radio compartment. Eugene Crossin in the upper turret told me later that his tracers poured into the belly of the Me 410, and a "kill" was subsequently credited to him. Another crew member recalled how the Me 410 streamed a trail of smoke as it dove away.'

'Black 13' had indeed been hit hard by defensive fire from the B-17 as it flew past off the bomber's right wing. Its right engine had been damaged and was on fire as Leutnant Kaschuba attempted an emergency landing. But 200 m above the ground, the engine fell away and the Me 410 crashed, probably in the immediate vicinity of Schleiz, some 30 km west of Plauen. On impact, Kaschuba was thrown out of the aircraft and died from a skull fracture. Bredemeier perished in the burning aircraft.

Overall, II./ZG 26 lost four aircraft and two crews during the encounter, and in turn claimed three victories. Eight of the A-1/U4s suffered stoppages with their BK 5 after firing just a few rounds. Yet at a meeting between Göring, Generalmajor Galland and Generalleutnant Josef Schmid, commander of I. *Jagdkorps*, on 15 May, the *Reichsmarschall* 'allowed' II./ZG 26 to remain as the only BK 5-equipped *Zerstörergruppe* despite the gun being a politically favoured weapon that was failing to live up to expectations and indirectly, if not directly, causing losses amongst Luftwaffe crews.

Indeed, just two days before, five Me 410A-1/U4s had fallen prey to P-51s before they had even managed to reach bombers out to strike at the Focke-Wulf plant at Tutow. One of the Messerschmitts was flown by Oberfeldwebel Wolfgang Martin of 4./ZG 26, who had been awarded the Knight's Cross on 30 December 1942 while flying with KG 3. Having only joined ZG 26 on 3 May 1944, Martin was killed along with his radio operator, Feldwebel Johann Ahlgrim.

On 29 May, during an Eighth Air Force attack on oil and aviation targets in eastern Germany and Poland, Me 410s from I. and II./ZG 26 were deployed from Königsberg. According to its later-captured *Kapitän*, one *Staffel* received information that B-17s were attacking Schneidemühl airfield unescorted, and the plan was for four Me 410s to attack the top, rear squadron of Flying Fortresses head-on in a dive. When the bombers were encountered, however, and the Messerschmitts began their turn to attack from a position 900 m

A senior NCO directs armourers who are attending to a jacked-up Me 410A-1/U2 from I./ZG 76 fitted with double underwing WGr. 21 mortar tubes for work against bombers. The aircraft also boasts forward-firing gun armament of two MG 17s and four 20 mm MG 151/20 cannon. The fighter was probably in the midst of having its guns calibrated when this photograph was taken (*EN Archive*)

above the B-17s, the *Zerstörer* were unexpectedly bounced by P-51s. Although three of the Me 410s were quickly shot down, the *Staffelkapitän* was able to escape and make a crash-landing, which killed his radio operator.

The following day, the same *Staffel* sent 13 Me 410s against another formation of B-17s, this time in the Magdeburg area. Again, according to what the *Staffelkapitän* told Allied interrogators later in the war, the losses suffered were catastrophic – only one Me 410 survived. However, official loss figures do not bear this out, listing only seven Me 410s as destroyed. Nevertheless, this figure was significant, and indicative of the high levels of attrition now being inflicted on the *Zerstörergruppen*.

Yet even at the eleventh hour, there were isolated successes brought about by the determination of the crews. During a major attack on Budapest by the Fifteenth Air Force on 2 July 1944, having failed to form up into a *Gefechtsverband*, 20 Me 410s of I./ZG 76 nevertheless attacked a lone combat wing of B-17s and claimed 13 bombers shot down for the loss of just one Me 410. In fact, the Fifteenth Air Force reported the loss of only four B-17s, although others were badly damaged.

By August, much of the Luftwaffe's single-engined fighter force was battered from either relentless air combat over the cauldron of Normandy or broken down by attrition suffered over the Reich itself, and the *Zerstörer* units were left even more vulnerable. II./ZG 76 was having to reform again, and while the other units were operational, the *Stab*, I. and II./ZG 26, all based well to the east around the Prussian city of Königsberg and now equipped with the Me 410, could only be deployed with caution. The *Stab* ZG 76 and I. *Gruppe* were in the far south in the Vienna area under 8. *Jagddivision*.

With losses steadily beginning to exceed successes, these units were slowly withdrawn from operations from July 1944. Most were subsequently converted to single-engined fighter *Gruppen*, thus fulfilling the long-felt wish of the *Zerstörer* crews themselves.

In a post-war paper, General Josef Kammhuber, father of the Luftwaffe's nightfighting force, summarised the Me 210/Me 410 by writing, 'Years of fruitless effort were expended in trying to improve these models, and in the meantime we missed the chance to develop, in time, the one machine which possessed all the necessary qualities – the Me 262'.

APPENDICES

COLOUR PLATES

1
Me 210 V1 Wk-Nr 0001 D-AABF, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, October 1939

The prototype Me 210 is seen here at the time of the commencement of its flight-testing programme at Augsburg in October 1939. The aircraft was left in its factory bare metal finish and carried large, early-style Swastika markings on each of its vertical stabilisers. Wk-Nr 0001 later had fabric tufts fitted to the upper wing surfaces to assess airflow.

2
Me 210 V2 Wk-Nr 0002 CE+BZ, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, July-September 1940

The V2 first flew in October 1939 with a six-letter code, but by mid-1940 it had been remarked as CE+BZ. The aircraft's bare metal surface became progressively worn and weathered with testing. Fitted with an interim canopy that had a bulbous rear section, it was the first Me 210 to feature a single fin and rudder.

3
Me 210 V10 Wk-Nr 0010 GI+SN, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, June 1941

The Me 210 V10 was used to assess the aircraft's flight controls and general handling prior to it suffering an undercarriage failure on 16 June 1941.

4
Me 210 V13 Wk-Nr 0013 GI+SQ, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, Germany, May 1941

The V13 was the only prototype to be fitted with four-bladed propellers in order to conduct comparison trials with aircraft with standard three-bladed propellers. On 31 May 1941, like V10, it suffered an undercarriage failure during an emergency landing test.

5
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2100110139 S9+BL of 3./SKG 210, Landsberg, Germany, late 1941

This aircraft was used by SKG 10 to convert aircrew from the Bf 110 to the Me 210. The fuselage band was almost certainly white, with the individual aircraft letter in yellow. Wk-Nr 2100110139 was reassigned to I./ZG 1 in January 1942, and following minor undercarriage damage sustained at Tours, it was listed on the strength of 3. *Staffel*.

6
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2100110063 2H+DA of *Versuchsstaffel* Me 210 (*Erprobungsstaffel* 210), Soesterberg, the Netherlands, August 1942

This aircraft is depicted here in the colours and markings it wore shortly before the trials unit formed the nucleus of 16./KG 6. It is finished in a 74/75/76 scheme of greys, with the aircraft letter 'D' in green, while the oft-seen last three digits of the Werknummer have been applied to the base of the tail.

7
Me 210A-1 2H+IA of *Versuchsstaffel* Me 210 (*Erprobungsstaffel* 210), Soesterberg, the Netherlands, September 1942

This Messerschmitt is finished in a lesser seen scheme featuring a dark grey upper fuselage, while the lower fuselage areas and tail assembly were marked with random, gently waving lines of the same grey over a lighter base shade. The aircraft letter 'I' was in red and the aircraft's Werknummer (unknown) was applied to the bottom of the fin. The spinners were in black, with red tips.

8
Me 210A-1 2N+FR of 7./ZG 1, Trapani, Sicily, late 1942/early 1943

An aircraft from the early contingent of Me 210s to reach the Mediterranean, this *Zerstörer* has faded light mottle over the fuselage and a white theatre band in the standard position on the rear fuselage. The aircraft letter 'F' is formed of a thin red outline, and this letter, unusually, appeared in smaller form on the tip of the white spinner in black.

9
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2384 2N+BR of 7./ZG 1, Trapani, Sicily, late 1942

This Me 210 was finished in a standard scheme of 74/75/76 in light, dispersed mottles and carried the white Luftwaffe Mediterranean theatre fuselage band, on which the unit code for ZG 1, '2N', was applied in small black letters, while the individual letter was in white. The spinners were in black, with white tips.

10
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2100110205 2N+LT of 9./ZG 1, Castelvetrano, Sicily, spring 1943

Completed at Augsburg in November 1942, this machine was still listed as in service in May 1944. It is depicted here while on operations in the Mediterranean and North Africa, where it carried the standard white fuselage theatre band. The aircraft's individual letter 'L' was in the yellow of 9. *Staffel*, as were the spinner tips.

11
Me 210A-1 Wk-Nr 2102251 2N+DD of *Stab* III./ZG 1, Castelvetrano, Sicily, spring 1943

Manufactured at Augsburg in February 1943, this Messerschmitt saw operational service over North Africa until it sustained 20 per cent damage in a landing accident on 18 March. The aircraft's individual letter was in the green of a *Stab* machine, as were the spinner tips. Once repaired, the Me 210 was used by ZG 26 in *Reichsverteidigung* operations from late 1943 – it was fitted with underwing 21 cm mortar tubes for this demanding role.

12
Me 210Ca-1 Z.066 of 5/1. *Kísérleti Éjszakai Vadászázad 'Bagoly'*, Ferihegy, Hungary, summer 1944

It appears that this Hungarian-built trials nightfighter of the

'Bagoly' (owl) Squadron was finished in a Luftwaffe-type scheme of 74/75/76, although these were probably a slightly lighter mix of greys. The standard national markings are carried on the fuselage and atop the fin and rudder. The aircraft was also adorned with the unit's owl emblem below the forward cockpit, while the spinners were finished in red/white/red/white.

13

Me 210Ca-1, Z.074, 102. *Gyorsbombázó osztály,* Várpalota or Hajduböszörmény, Hungary, 1944

This fast bomber is finished in a more standard and darker German 74/75/76 scheme than that seen in Profile 12. The Hungarian national markings on the tail appear weathered and worn. Note also the crossed style of the number '7', which was a usual feature on Hungarian aircraft.

14

Me 410 V1 Wk-Nr 027 DI+NW, Messerschmitt AG, Augsburg, 1942

The first prototype of the 'Me 410' evolved from Me 210A-0 Wk-Nr 027, using DB 603A engines and a lengthened fuselage.

15

Me 410 Wk-Nr 10241 'Black 13' of *Erprobungskommando* 25, Rechlin, Germany, April 1944

This aircraft was finished in a heavily daubed grey mottle and, as customary for aircraft attached to E.Kdo 25, was assigned a fighter-style tactical number. For operational trials it was fitted with a *Flak* 43 gun in the nose and a ZFR 4A telescopic sight. Later transferred to II./ZG 26, the aircraft was lost in action on 12 May 1944 while being flown by Leutnant Paul Kaschuba and Feldwebel Karl Bredemeier, both formerly of E.Kdo 25.

16

Me 410A-3 Wk-Nr 10259 F6+OK of 2./(F) 122, Monte Corvino, Italy, November 1943

This reconnaissance variant, described as an A-3, was finished in a light grey mottle. The white areas of its Balkenkreuz, white theatre band and tail Swastika were crudely muted with daubed grey paint, and its outer left engine nacelle was stained with exhaust deposits. The aircraft was captured by British forces when it landed in error at Monte Corvino airfield, near Salerno. It was later assessed at RAE Farnborough and Boscombe Down, as well as the CFE at Tangmere. The Me 410 was eventually Struck off Charge in August 1947 and sold for scrap.

17

Me 410A-3 F2+CA of *Stab/Ergänzungsgruppe.(F). Gr.,* Riga, Latvia, spring 1944

This Me 410 was assigned to a specialist *Ergänzungsgruppe* in Latvia for the training of replacement aircrew to fly Me 410 reconnaissance missions. It carries a yellow theatre band for aircraft operating on the Eastern Front and its individual letter and spinners are in the usual *Stab* colour of green.

18

Me 410A-1/U2 Wk-Nr 266 2N+AD of *Stab* III./ZG 1, possibly at Vorden, the Netherlands, September-October 1943

The forward fuselage of this *Zerstörer* was finished in a 74/75/76 mottle, but from aft of the Balkenkreuz it is the darker colours that dominate. The individual letter was in green, outlined in white, and the first two letters of the aircraft code have been obscured by an overpainted band of what appears to be more dark grey. The last three digits of the Werknummer have been applied at the forward base of the fin. The aircraft was armed with a nose-mounted twin MG 151 WB 151A gun pack.

19

Me 410A-1/U2 3U+MK of 5./ZG 26, Königsberg Devau, Germany, late summer 1944

This aircraft was adorned in a lesser-seen scribble pattern, probably of RLM 71 over a base of 74/75/76. The ZG 26 unit code of '3U' was applied in very small letters aft of a white fuselage band on the port side, while 'MK' was in black. The scribble extended over the Balkenkreuz but not the fuselage band. The spinners had white spirals.

20

Me 410A-3 7A+MH of 1.(F)/121, possibly at an airfield in France, 1944

This reconnaissance machine was given an unusual mottled scheme featuring a base coat of RLM 76 overlaid with dabs of RLM 80 or 82, along with 81. The aircraft code letters have been partially obscured by the heavy mottling. The spinners are in white.

21

Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 120005 9K+JH of 1./KG 51, northern France, early 1944

'White J' was an aircraft deployed on bombing missions over England in early 1944. It was finished in a blend of dark greys, with heavy mottling on the tail assembly. The unit code was applied in small letters forward of the Balkenkreuz. The undersides of the aircraft were covered in a temporary black distemper for night missions.

22

Me 410A-1/U3 Wk-Nr 10117 'Yellow 7' of II./ZG 26, Hildesheim, Germany, February 1944

This single-seat conversion was intended to assess a GM-1 nitrous oxide power boost system. To save weight, no side gun barbettes were fitted and the radio mast was removed to decrease drag. The engine nacelle carried the unit's yellow clog emblem and the white fuselage band had a yellow horizontal bar that stretched its entire width.

23

Me 410A Wk-Nr 10185 U5+KG of *Stab* V.(Z)/KG 2, Königsberg Neumark, Germany, early 1944

V.(Z)/KG 2 undertook nocturnal nuisance raids and nightfighting sorties over Britain for several months from late 1943. Wk-Nr 10185 has been fitted with flame dampers and the individual aircraft letter 'K' is in green for a *Stab* aircraft, outlined in white. The spinners were black with white tips.

24

Me 210A-0(1) Wk-Nr 2100110049 2N+FR of 7./ZG 1, Wels, Austria, early 1944

This Me 210 was finished in a dark grey standard late-war scheme with toned down Balkenkreuz and fuselage code letters. Note the twin underwing 21 cm WGr mortars.

25
Me 410A-1/U4 Wk-Nr 420481 3U+LP of 6./ZG 26, Königsberg Neumark, Germany, April 1944

This BK 5 cannon-equipped aircraft was finished in a standard late-war grey mottle with white fuselage band and the *Gruppe* clog emblem applied to its engines. The three-digit numeral painted high on the tail assembly may have been a part and/or transit number.

26
Me 410A-1/U4 Wk-Nr 420292 3U+CC of *Stab* II./ZG 26, Königsberg Neumark, Germany, May 1944

In addition to the prominent five-centimetre BK 5 cannon in the nose, this aircraft was fitted with 37 mm cannon in the bomb-bay for anti-bomber operations. The aircraft's individual letter is in the *Stab* colour of green and the machine has a white fuselage band, possibly a legacy of service in the Mediterranean. The *Gruppe*'s yellow clog emblem was applied to the outer engine panelling.

27
Me 410A-1/U4(?) Wk-Nr 410082 'Yellow 5' of II./ZG 76, Seerappen, Germany, autumn 1944

An intriguing aircraft, this *Zerstörer* was finished in the oft-seen mottle of 74/75/76. The large fighter-style number was applied forward of the Balkenkreuz, with the II. *Gruppe* bar aft over what appears to be a very lightly applied or faded fuselage bar, possibly dark red in colour, but this is not certain. The *Geschwader* code, which after careful study and photographic inverting, appears to be 'M8' – and thus ZG 76 – is in small characters next to the aircraft number, while the Werknummer was prominent at the base of the tail. The Me 410 was also fitted with a *Zielfernrohr* ZFR 4A gunsight.

28
Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 017 U5+FE of V.(Z)/KG 2, Vitry, France, early 1944

Deployed on night missions to England, aircraft 'F' was finished in a very dark grey mottle, but the black that was applied to its undersides extended high up the fuselage in a wavy pattern and also covered most of the tail. The code was in black, with the 'F' outlined in white. The white outlines of the fuselage Balkenkreuz were softened by the black over-finish and the spinners were segmented in black and grey.

29
Me 410A-1 Wk-Nr 710450, unit allocation unknown, Germany, 1945

A typical, late-war, scribble-patterned Me 410, this aircraft was found at an aircraft dump at the end of the war, possibly even before it had been assigned to an operational unit. Wk-Nr 710450 has a random scribble and mottle finish of RLM 81 and 82 applied over 76, but the engine nacelles are in a plain green. The Balkenkreuz is formed of just the white outlines. The mottle on the tail assembly is much more dispersed, with heavy daubs, while the Swastika is obscured and there are various number identifiers. The spinners are dark green, with lighter green tips.

30
Me 410A Wk-Nr 263 of No 601 Sqn (formerly 2N+HT of ZG 76), Gerbini, Sicily, August 1943

This ZG 76 machine was captured by Allied forces following the invasion of Sicily and taken over by Spitfire-equipped No 601 Sqn on 25 August 1943. It was painted with crude RAF markings, through which parts of its original Luftwaffe code were still visible. The aircraft was later 'acquired' by the B-25-equipped 12th BG, and it crashed while taking off on its first flight with the USAAF unit on 1 October 1943, killing the pilot.

Factory-fresh Me 410 Wk-Nr 420098 PP+VO is rolled out from Augsburg in late October 1943 (*EN Archive*)

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Front Cover

On 22 February 1944, as part of Operation *Argument* (a major air offensive directed against German fighter production centres), the USAAF's Fifteenth Air Force despatched a force consisting of four groups of B-17 Flying Fortresses and four groups of B-24 Liberators (183 aircraft in all) to bomb the Messerschmitt components works at Prufening and the fighter assembly plant at Obertraubling, respectively. Leading the 5th Bomb Wing were the B-17s of the 97th BG, which, along with the 301st BG, were the only two groups able to locate the primary target, onto which they dropped 153 tons of bombs.

As part of a concerted response, in the early afternoon the Luftwaffe sent up a force of ten BK 5 cm cannon-armed Me 410/U4 *Zerstörer* of 5./ZG 26 from Oberpfaffenhofen led by the *Staffelkapitän*, Oberleutnant Fritz Stehle. As the B-17s completed their bomb run, the *Zerstörer* closed in to intercept. Shortly before 1300 hrs, Feldwebel Baunicke opened fire with his cannon and shot down the first bomber with the BK 5. Around ten minutes later, Stehle claimed another south of Dachau.

Mark Postlethwaite's painting captures the moment that the Me 410s passed through the rear of a formation of B-17Fs from the 97th BG during the air engagement over Prufening.

Title Pages

Veteran, lengthened, Me 210 2N+DD of *Stab* ZG 26 has been pushed back into its wooded dispersal at Diepholz, which offers scant camouflage from enemy fighter attack. The aircraft, photographed in 1943, is fitted with twin underwing WGr. 21 cm mortar tubes and carries the *Gruppe* clog emblem on its outer nacelle, while its tail assembly has been painted white – probably as an aid to recognition when flying in formation (*EN Archive*)